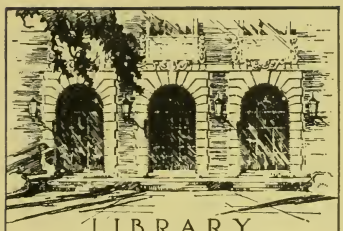
CECILE

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"BREEZIE LANGTON"



LIBRARY
OF THE
UNIVERSITY
OF ILLINOIS
823
Sm2c
v.3

CENTRAL CIRCULATION AND BOOKSTACKS

The person borrowing this material is responsible for its renewal or return before the **Latest Date** stamped below. **You may be charged a minimum fee of $75.00 for each non-returned or lost item.**

Theft, mutilation, or defacement of library materials can be causes for student disciplinary action. All materials owned by the University of Illinois Library are the property of the State of Illinois and are protected by Article 16B of *Illinois Criminal Law and Procedure.*

TO RENEW, CALL (217) 333-8400.
University of Illinois Library at Urbana-Champaign

FEB 28 2000

When renewing by phone, write new due date below previous due date. L162

CECILE:

OR,

MODERN IDOLATERS.

BY

HAWLEY SMART,

AUTHOR OF

'BREEZIE LANGTON,' 'BITTER IS THE RIND,'

ETC.

'In yesterday's reach and to-morrow's,
Out of sight though they lie of to-day,
There have been and there yet shall be sorrows
That smite not and bite not in play.'

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,
NEW BURLINGTON STREET.
1871.

LONDON: PRINTED BY
SPOTTISWOODE AND CO., NEW-STREET SQUARE
AND PARLIAMENT STREET

823
Sm 2c
v.3

CONTENTS

OF

THE THIRD VOLUME.

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Amongst the Pheasants	1
II.	A Trip to Lasterton	20
III.	A Death in Fleet Court	38
IV.	Luce on her Art	55
V.	Mrs. St. Leger's Philosophy	73
VI.	A Communist at Home	89
VII.	Disenchantment	107
VIII.	Lady Trillamere's Fête	128
IX.	At the Marble Arch	152
X.	Wyndham redeems his Vow	174
XI.	'The Feathers'	197
XII.	Who's her Companion?	217
XIII.	Alas! for Man's Vanity	235
XIV.	Defeat of the Communists	257
XV.	Death of De Vitre	282
XVI.	Reconciliation	302

CECILE.

CHAPTER I.

'AMONGST THE PHEASANTS.'

THE autumn verges towards a conclusion, the leaves come whirling down apace, the hedges are no longer blind,—

'Hounds advertise they will be there,'

and come crashing through the coverts, in justification of such promise. The pheasants are having a hard time of it, while the rabbits are exhibiting that perverseness which forms so prominent a trait in rabbitical (excuse the word) character. 'Drat 'em they never are out when wanted,' as I

heard a head keeper exclaim lugubriously on one occasion. He had spent the last forty-eight hours placing parafine in the burrows, and had apparently hermetically sealed up his rabbits.

Childerley is very full and very gay this autumn. Despite Sir Hervey's losses, no retrenchment has made itself manifest. Shooting-party has followed shooting-party ever since the beginning of September; but the gayest of them all is that assembled this November fortnight. Most of the personages of our story are here: the men to polish off the cream of the Childerley covers; the women! well to see them do it, I suppose. You see the ladies must go somewhere during these autumn months, and it is not given to them all to delight in watering places. It is good for us they should flit about these sporting mansions; they prevent our relapsing into barbarian habits, such as sleeping after dinner, &c.; they apply perpetual social blisters to our indolent

natures, which, though painful, are doubtless of service to us. When they immerse us in theatricals, or carry us off over horrible roads to distant balls, I always feel, with Mr. Tapley, that too much jollity is bad for one. When the coachman being drunk, it devolves upon your imperfectly clad self to drive home the carriage in a hard frost, you feel as if you had got over a severe penance, and that the incurred cold only once disposed of, you have a right to commit much social wickedness. Dance with the wrong people, flirt with the wrong people, shoot your neighbours' birds, and override the hounds. Higher misdemeanours the country wots not of.

Mrs. St. Leger is at Childerley, and I need scarcely say had taken care that Roland Dance should be of the party. He was, as we know, an old visitor there, so that she had found little difficulty on that point. Indeed, had she but known it, her own presence there had been the subject of far more

diplomacy. She had laughingly invited herself towards the end of the London season, and Cecile had cordially assented. 'Only give me a little notice of what time is likely to suit you, Pauline, and I'll try and have some of our own set to meet you,' said Lady Mallandaine. But when Mrs. St. Leger wrote to indicate the time of her proposed visit, to Cecile's astonishment, Sir Hervey objected strongly to receive her. Warm words passed between him and Cecile on the subject; and he only yielded at last to his wife's vehement representations that it was impossible for her to back out of the invitation she had given in town.

Lia Remington is at Childerley, and sorely disconcerted at the aspect of affairs there generally. She disapproves of Cecile's flirtation with Ernest De Vitre. Cecile is undoubtedly accepting more attention from that gentleman than it is well Lady Mallandaine should. Mrs. St. Leger she dislikes we know, and she has the annoyance of finding her

a frequent guest in the blue and silver hung boudoir. And then, alas, her old pleasant relations with Alec Merriott have all fallen through. It is a dangerous experiment ever that stroking vanity's coat the wrong way. Miss Remington's sharp remark on Alec's failure that afternoon at 'Lord's,' had led to considerable estrangement between them. Curious enough it was the result of disappointed vanity on both sides, and on the same identical point. It had been bitter gall to a proud girl like Lia to see her lover go down the first time she had graced the lists in his honour. But if it was disappointment hard to bear for her, it was veriest verjuice for Alec to fail on this occasion. Savage and sore wounded in feeling, he had walked up to her carriage seeking comfort. When he had failed in obeying her hest before, she had poured the oil of sympathy into the wounds of his vanity, but this time she had met him with a sneer: 'I *did think* you could play cricket, Captain Merriott.'

When our vanity is still bleeding, contemptuous sarcasm bites much as nitric acid does when it follows the knife. We feel it in every nerve, and we do not forget it in a hurry.

Yes, Alec Merriott also is at Childerley, but he avoids Lia carefully. Once or twice he has been compelled to take her into dinner, but has contrived to be frigidly commonplace on such occasions. Miss Remington fumes and frets over these chance opportunities. She is longing to take back her words, and confess that she could have bitten her tongue out for giving utterance to them; but Alec will afford her no opening for so doing, and Lia is too proud to humble herself except occasion be highly favourable. If he would admit how much she had wounded him, if he would upbraid her with unkindness, she was prepared to be very penitent; but Alec never alluded to the subject, avoided her as much as possible, and took refuge in frigid courtesy when they were thrown in contact.

A very pretty day's pheasant shooting had come to a close. The final 'hot corner' was done with; and, after counting over the long row of birds that attested the accuracy of their shooting, the sportsmen handed their guns to the keepers, and prepared to tramp back to the house.

'Capital day, Sir Hervey,' exclaimed Merriott. 'Thirty birds, better than last year; though Wyndham there in place of Egerton Slane would partially account for the difference.'

'Yes, he did'nt let many rocketers by at the top end, and they rather beat Slane last November,' replied the Baronet.

'I was lucky,' said Gwynne. 'No wind you see, or I shouldn't have gathered so many.'

'Isn't he nice about it,' laughed Dance, 'after wiping my eye in beautiful style twice; but De Vitre did signal damage on the right; where is he? Ah, here he comes.'

'I hope you had your share of shooting?' enquired Sir Hervey, courteously, as Ernest joined them.

'Excellent, and am glad to say did justice to it. You'll find a brace dead in the scrubs below Lambton,' he continued, addressing the head keeper, 'when you run the retrievers over to-morrow morning; they were rather long shots and struggled on.'

'All right, Sir,' replied the keeper, touching his hat. 'You kept the boys pretty busy in your neighbourhood, as it was. They'd plenty to do picking up.'

'And now for home,' said Alec. 'Give me a pipe, Ro; my pouch is empty.'

Dance paused to comply with his friend's request, while the others walked on.

'Ah, that's all right,' remarked Merriott, after lighting his pipe; 'you and I will walk home together now. I want to have a quiet talk with you, old man. I mean to clear out of Childerley some time to-morrow. Things are all running cross. We're all on

the jar here,' and Alec emitted a huge blast of tobacco, and peered inquisitively at his companion's face.

'I don't understand you,' replied Dance, also puffing vigorously at his pipe, but without turning his face towards Merriott.

'Oh, you don't,' replied Alec, sententiously. 'Ah, well, my lady is carrying on with De Vitre in a way that, at all events, Sir Hervey is beginning to feel uncomfortable about. I'll acquit her of aught but imprudence, but neither her husband nor her cousin Wyndham like that flirtation.'

'Pshaw, you make mountains of mole hills, Alec.'

'No, I don't; but mole hills with a volcanic formation are not to be disregarded.'

'The fact is,' retorted Roland, sharply, 'you don't get on with Miss Remington. Why can't you say so at once?'

'Quite prepared to admit it,' returned Alec, quietly, 'that's jar number two, in the social system. We have quarrelled in good

earnest, and are not likely to become friends again.'

'Nonsense, you know you care more about that girl than anything on earth.'

Merriott bit his pipe hard, and paused for some moments, ere he replied. 'I won't be a humbug to you, Ro,' he said, at last. 'I do; but having satisfactorily ascertained she don't care two straws about me; that I am a mere appendage of her vanity, I am about to do the righteous thing, and retire in favour of Babbington, &c.'

'You're an idiot, Alec, if you don't believe Lia Remington cares for you,' said Dance, quickly.

Now Merriott had really no doubt in his own mind that she did. But there was a very pretty little quarrel between them now, and he was determined that no overtures for a reconciliation should come from his side.

'Very nice of you to say so,' replied Alec at length, and though he spoke in his usual

indolent tones, the blood surged hot in his veins at his friend's assurance. 'But, I fancy, I'm best judge on that point.'

'There you're wrong,' observed Dance.

'I think not. If I remarked about your *liaison* with Mrs. St. Leger, I presume you would think yourself the best judge.'

'Never mind that; you can tell me nothing I don't know—that I am but the mere plaything of a heartless woman, granted; but I can't break the thrall. I shall wear my chains, Alec, it's likely until it is her caprice to cast me off. I know it's infatuation; so are opium-eating and dram-drinking, but men find them bad to break away from. Your case is different. Please God, old fellow, you may never be the fool that I am.'

There was silence between the two after this. Dance's infatuation was inexplicable. He saw the case so clearly himself. He knew he had thrown his heart away upon a woman who played upon it as she might

have fingered an instrument. A woman in whom the capability of real love was dead, whose highest form of sentiment now was mere caprice—a worldly-minded *intriguante*:

> 'Beautiful passionate body,
> That never has ached with a heart!'

and he knew as far as he was concerned she never had.

But there had been another *tête-à-tête* that afternoon, the results of which had been still less satisfactory than that of Dance and Merriott.

Miss Remington had invaded the boudoir, and, as luck would have it, had found Lady Mallandaine alone.

'This is charming, Cecile,' she exclaimed, 'catching you all alone. I never can get a good gossip with you now. That odious Mrs. St. Leger is always with you.'

'Don't be abusive, Lia,' laughed Lady Mallandaine. 'Pauline is a very intimate friend of mine.'

'And I don't like her a bit the better for

that. I detest her, and I don't care who knows it.'

'But, why?' enquired Cecile.

'Do you want me to tell you?' replied Lia, vehemently. 'Because you are changed since you knew her; because I believe that she is working evil between you and your old friends; because,' she continued, passionately, 'I feel that she is a bad, false, vicious woman,' and here Miss Remington started from her chair, and paced the floor, impetuously.

'Lia, how dare you say such things,' exclaimed Cecile, and her brows knit and the blue eyes sparkled as she spake. At the bottom of her heart she felt that there might be reason in her friend's accusation, and she was none the more inclined to listen patiently on that account.

'Because I must and will speak out. Cecile, we have been friends from childhood, and I can't bear to see you make a fool of yourself and wreck your happiness in the

way you are doing now,' and Miss Remington threw herself into a chair, and covered her face with her hands.

Lady Mallandaine gave vent to a low, hard laugh. We none of us like to be told we are making fools of ourselves. 'Perhaps, Lia,' she observed, 'you will condescend to be a little more explicit?'

'Cecile! Cecile! you understand me well enough. Don't pretend not to do so. Do what I would have you do: break from this new set you have got mixed up with.'

'I like them, and they like me; why should I?'

'My darling,' cried Lia, 'you are compromising yourself with a man not fit to tie your shoe-strings. Are you so blind as not to see it?'

'I'll not affect to misunderstand you. Because I am intimate with the man who saved my child's life, and has been nothing but kindness to me ever since, you, my oldest friend, are willing to place the worst

construction on such intimacy. I don't care,' said Cecile, defiantly. 'I will not be preached to as to whom I had best know or otherwise.'

'I am sure I don't mean that. I would be the last person ever to believe ill of you, Cecile; but if you allow such attentions from Mr. De Vitre as you do at present, don't think but that the world we live in will pass heavy strictures on your conduct.'

'I should fancy I am quite old enough to judge for myself on such a point,' replied Lady Mallandaine coldly.

'I have done,' said Lia sorrowfully. 'Forgive me, Cecile, if I have wounded you. I will never speak of this again, dearest. Let us part friends,' and the warm-hearted girl rose from her chair, pressed her lips to Lady Mallandaine's sullen cheek, and departed.

Cecile sat for some time absorbed in thought. She knew that she had admitted Ernest De Vitre as an admirer for some time, that he had been very devoted in his *petits*

soins of late she was also aware. But Lia Remington had now made her comprehend for the first time that people were beginning to talk of their intimacy. It rather disturbed her; not a great deal, because she knew perfectly well that though she liked De Vitre very much, she was not at all in love with him. She felt indignant that such commentary should be made upon her conduct, and determined to brave the world's opinion sooner than relinquish her intimacy with him. Her character, as I have said before, had hardened; she, conscious of her innocence in this matter, was not to be cowed by scandalous tongues.

Aye de mí! It goes hard mostly with men when they defy public opinion, it goes still harder with women, but when they risk their fair fame in the struggle, we know, as a rule, what comes of it. Despair of refuting the accusation ofttimes conduces to the offence.

The smoking room at Childerley was a

little dull that night. They had played the usual rubber, and had now subsided into tobacco *per se*. Sir Hervey had retired as usual early, and De Vitre had followed his example. Dance, Merriott, and Wyndham Gwynne were the only devotees left; and the three, absorbed in their own reflections, smoked as silently and solemnly as a triumvirate of Turks. Alec had announced his departure at an early hour on the 'morrow. That there were discordant elements in the party was palpable to all, though nobody, of course, alluded to the fact. At last Merriott and Dance rose, and wishing Gwynne 'good night,' took their bed-room candlesticks.

Wyndham seated himself in front of the fire, and lighting a fresh manilla, betook himself to serious cogitation.

The discovery, which he had made in London, that the Mallandaines were living on such indifferent terms had grieved him much. Still Sir Hervey's explanation had seemed to account for it. But this last fortnight at

Childerley had opened his eyes, and induced him to take a different view of their domestic differences. He knew Ernest De Vitre well; was quite aware of what a cool cynical unprincipled man he was: his violent flirtation with Cecile was palpable. Mrs. St. Leger he had the advantage of knowing by repute, before he met her. To a man of the world like Wyndham, it was pretty transparent that there was little libel in what he had heard to her disparagement. He was very fond of his cousin, and now her mother's death-bed rose once more before his mind's eye, and the engagement he had entered into upon that occasion. If ever Cecile wanted watching over it was now; but how was he to interfere? If Sir Hervey would not speak, how could he? and Sir Hervey, still thirsting to recover the lost confidence of his young wife, feared to alienate her still further by stringent or precipitous measures.

What could he do? The manilla waxed

low and threatened to burn his moustaches as he still pondered over the knotty problem. Suddenly, he muttered, 'That's it; I'm no use here; By G—d, I'll go. If Luce was right, it's a trump card in my hand when the time comes. Don't suppose she was, but it will be something to go on, anyway;' and, throwing the stump of the cheroot into the fire, he also sought his pillow.

CHAPTER II.

'A TRIP TO LASTERTON.'

THERE was rather an exodus from Childerley next day. Not only was Merriott flitting, but both Miss Remington and Wyndham Gwynne, after the perusal of their letters, announced mysterious calls to town. Cecile made no effort to detain the former, she was angry and indignant with her; and Lia, who in other days, had always had a hard fight to get away from Childerley, found no resistance made to her departure upon this occasion. So under Major Gwynne's charge, she duly took her place in the afternoon train. They had become very good friends those two, but little conversation took place between them on the journey. They were both too much occupied with their

own thoughts to wish to talk. Gwynne handed his fair companion into the carriage for which he had telegraphed at her request, and then went off to a solitary dinner at his club.

London in November is not a cheerful sight, and yet, perhaps, there is more sociability in the big city then, or from then, until Parliament meets, than at any other time of the year. In the whirlpool of the season there is no time for intimacy; then comes the vacation, when we are all turned out to kick up our heels; while October is worn away by the kicking, gibbing, and other ill temper, we most of us display, upon once more putting our heads through the collar. However, it was not Wyndham's fate to experience this sociability. He dined at his club *solus*, he wandered about it like a wraith, and felt that he was observed, but not understanded, by the waiters. He went down to the Anti-Lysistrata to smoke, and found three of the men he most disliked in

that institution, picking to pieces Egerton Slane's last novel. He felt bored and hipped. He ordered a stiff glass of brandy-and-water, drank it, and went to bed.

Next morning saw him on his way to Lasterton. We all know Lasterton, that quaint old cathedral town, with its charming dear old close ; those soft grassy meadows by the side of that magnificent trout stream, but in which, alas, the speckled fish run wondrous scarce of late. With that tree-crowned hill, up which for their bodies' health the Lasterton boys are bound twice a week to climb. With its magnificent downs, overhanging the city. The queer steep High Street, with the old cross at the bend ; and then the cathedral, with its wondrous gurgoyles and somewhat mean external appearance, but which boasts one of the richest interiors in England. Lasterton, in years long gone by, capital of England, city that went through such sore tribulation in the time of the civil wars.

Wyndham Gwynne, deep in a cheroot,

troubled his head little about the past glories of Lasterton. He knew the place well, although he had never set foot in it since his sojourn there, near eight years ago, with Ernest de Vitre; but in addition to that, was he not of Lasterton College in his boyhood? He was deep in reflection over this story of Madame Luce's, to wit, that she had been, as she deemed at the time, married to De Vitre in the Baptist school-room at Lasterton. Not likely that that had been a real marriage; yet it was just possible it might be so. Improbable, very, from what he knew of De Vitre. At all events, if he could, he would ascertain the rights of it. Chapels of the Dissenters, Wyndham knew, were licensed for marriages, and such marriages, celebrated by one of their ministers, held good and valid. But why the school-room? A ceremony performed therein could clearly not hold good.

He was immersed in such reflections, when the train stopped at Lasterton. Consigning

his portmanteau to the 'The George,' Wyndham commenced his enquiries for the Baptist minister of the town. Not much difficulty about ascertaining who he was, nor any great trouble about ascertaining his address. To the abode of the Rev. Mr. Dorridge he accordingly betook himself.

A Nonconformist cure of souls is not attended usually with any great emolument. Although the Rev. Mr. Dorridge might be highly eloquent on Sundays, yet his flock did not remunerate his eloquence sufficiently to enable him to live on his oratory. Consequently he, on week days—for divines must live—carried on the highly respectable calling of a grocer. It was in a very well-to-do shop in the High Street, actively engaged in the dispensation of tea and sugar, &c., in lieu of doctrine, that Wyndham found him.

I earnestly deprecate any intention here of sneering at the ministry of the dissenting church. Elected from the people of their

religion, and with no endowment to fall back on, they must perforce get their living like their parishioners. No disparagement to them that they earn it honestly with their own hands. I only describe what who will may see for himself. These ministers are often tradesmen.

Mr. Dorridge saluted Wyndham with a polite bow, and enquired what he could do for him.

'You seem busy now, and I wish to have some conversation with you on a subject connected with your duties as Baptist minister here,' rejoined Gwynne. 'It may detain you some time. It would be best, therefore, if you would say when you will be at leisure to attend to me.'

'Certainly, certainly,' replied Mr. Dorridge, 'we *are* rather busy just now.' He was a brisk little man, with a slightly sanctimonious expression—very little of that, though—not at all of the Stiggins' type. The Stigginses and Chadbands of this

world don't keep grocer's shops and earn their own living—they are too good to be guilty of such impiety.

'Perhaps you will mention when you will be at leisure.'

'If you wouldn't mind looking in about half-past four,' said Mr. Dorridge, 'I think we shall have broke the neck of it, then. Trade brisk to-day, sir, very; run on currants most extraordinary.'

'Very good,' said Gwynne; 'for the present, good-bye.'

'Good-day, sir; good-day. I shall be ready for you. What for you, ma'am? God bless me, currants again—how very singular. Did you say one pound or two?'

Wyndham walked back to his hotel, had some luncheon, and then passed away the time that intervened between that and his appointment in wandering over the old haunts he knew so well. A tinge of sadness is apt to come over us when, later in life, we survey the scenes of our youth *alone*.

With a companion of those early days there are few things more enjoyable; but it is very different when we look at them solitarily. To those about to marry, I would say take your brides there. If, in the first flush of the honeymoon, your wife don't take an absurd interest in the haunts of your youth, she is no true woman, or cares little about you.

Half-past four, and Wyndham wends his way once more to the High Street. Mr. Dorridge is waiting for him at the shop-door, so metamorphosed that Wyndham gazes at him in undisguised astonishment. The brisk little grocer of the morning is attired in a suit of black, and tall hat. The corners of his mouth are drawn down; the black bead-like eyes, with a twinkle of fun in them, that met Wyndham on his former visit, are now cast down and subdued. The grocer is gone, and the Rev. Mr. Dorridge stands before him.

'My friend, I am at your disposal. What

is it I can do for you?' enquires the little man, in solemn, measured tones.

'My first object is to examine your register of marriages. I want to look at the registration of a marriage that took place here some eight years ago. Is there any difficulty about that?'

'None whatever. "Lead on, I'll follow thee." I mean you'll follow me,' said Mr. Dorridge, in some confusion, and departing from the somewhat tragic tones in which he had commenced his reply.

Mr. Dorridge led the way to the chapel of his ministration; and, in a small room corresponding to the vestry of a church, he unlocked a large chest, from which he extracted, after some slight investigation, a couple of bound manuscript volumes.

'What you seek,' he said, 'should be in one of these. What did you say the date was?'

'July 18th, 185—.'

'If you make search in the one, I will use

my poor endeavours to discover what you want in the other.'

There was a silence of some minutes as the two steadily turned over the leaves of their respective volumes.

'Here it is, sir; at least I have found July 185—. There were, I see, three marriages that month. What name do you want?'

'Ernest De Vitre.'

'No such name, but here's Ernest Carlton.'

'Let me look, what is the lady's name?'

'Luce Schwerin. Witnessed only by Arthur Matthews, the officiating minister, and Jeremiah Tewson.'

'I will just make an extract of this,' observed Gwynne. 'Now,' he continued, 'do you know anything of the Rev. Arthur Matthews?'

'Undoubtedly not; but all this took place three years before I ever saw Lasterton.'

'And Jeremiah Tewson?' said Gwynne, interrogatively.

'Yes; I know all about him. He's an

old man still living in the town, and once officiated as a sort of clerk in this chapel. He doubtless did so on this occasion. He is very infirm now, and would probably recollect all about the Rev. Mr. Matthews's ministration.'

'Well, I need give you no further trouble,' said Wyndham, as they left the chapel together, 'beyond asking you for Tewson's address.'

'Softly, softly, my friend,' replied Mr. Dorridge. 'Poor old Tewson would be greatly perturbed by an interview with one of the unrighteous — excuse me, I mean with a stranger like yourself. If you will just go back to your inn, and get some dinner, I will go and see Tewson for you, and call in, about eight o'clock, with the result.'

Wyndham hesitated. Should he trust the stranger altogether?

'I am doing the best I can for you,' said the little man. 'I shall get much more out of Tewson than you will, and more than if

you accompanied me. Leave it to me, sir; leave it to me. You can make enquiries yourself, if you are not satisfied with the tidings I bring you.'

This was so obviously true that Wyndham hesitated no longer, but thanked him, and said he would leave the matter for the present in his hands.

A very few minutes after eight, Mr. Dorridge made his appearance at the 'George,' and was duly ushered up to Wyndham's sitting-room.

'Pray sit down,' said the latter, as, cigar in mouth, he rose to welcome his visitor.

Mr. Dorridge took a chair, and looked hard at Wyndham's cigar.

The latter caught the expression. 'I trust this doesn't annoy you,' he said.

'No, far from it,' returned the little man. 'The fact is I rather like it; indeed, I used to be very fond of a cigar in my unconverted days, but it wouldn't do now, you know, Major Gwynne; in the position I hold now

I have to be so very careful. Still'— and Mr. Dorridge fidgetted restlessly in his chair.

Wyndham looked at him for a minute with an amused expression of countenance, and then threw his cigar-case on the table.

'Well, I don't know,' said the other. 'There's no real harm in it; I think I will— the elders will never know, and, as for Mrs. Dorridge, I shall be so flavoured with your tobacco smoke, that whether or no I transact a little business on my own account can make no difference, can it, sir?'

'Certainly not,' laughed Wyndham; 'lay the sin, if sin it be, at my door.'

'You and I, sir, as men of the world, know it to be harmless, but, dear me, in my position I have to be dreadfully particular. The congregation might not like it, and then it might affect the business. My connection, Major Gwynne, is principally dissenting,'— and with that Mr. Dorridge quietly lit a cigar, and began to smoke with much tranquil enjoyment.

'You were not always a Baptist, I presume?' said Gwynne.

'Oh, dear, no. I need make no secret of it, since everyone here knows the story. I came to Lasterton as a strolling player. Whether I'd talent or not, at all events the public never recognised it, and I had led a somewhat precarious life for some years. Here I made acquaintance with my wife; her father then had the business I have now. She grieved a good deal over my unregenerated state; to cut a long story short, I became regenerated, and married her, assisted in the shop till the old man died and left us the business.'

'I rather wonder you didn't relapse then,' laughed Wyndham.

'Bless you, sir, you don't know Mrs. Dorridge. She kept me up to the mark. She's a clever woman, and wouldn't have any backslidings. I was always fluent in talking, the old actor trade helped me, I suppose, and the end of it was, two years ago, I be-

came minister here. They're very good people all of them—always willing to help each other—but they've prejudices, strong prejudices: tobacco's one, gaudy neck-ties is another. You can't hold the women for bonnets, of course, any more than you can in any other creed the sun looks down upon.'

'Won't you help yourself?' said Wyndham, much amused as he pointed to the decanters. 'No prejudice concerning that, I trust.'

'Oh, no; creature comforts in moderation are quite admissible, and I never wish to infringe on that score. But I do miss my pipe,' said the little man plaintively, as he mixed himself a modest modicum of brandy-and-water.

'Well,' said Wyndham, 'now to business,' as he puffed lazily at his cigar. 'Did you see Tewson?'

'Yes,' and Mr. Dorridge became at once concise and business-like.

'Matthews was a member and minister of our church, and at the time that marriage took place was trying to earn a living here as a drawing-master. But he was not minister to our chapel, although, apparently, he had been one elsewhere.'

'Good,' said Wyndham. 'Was Tewson present at that marriage?'

'He's not very clear about it, but thinks he was, and says it was in the old chapel.'

'What do you mean by the old chapel?'

'Well,' said Mr. Dorridge, 'what is now our school-room was formerly our chapel.'

'And is your present chapel licensed for marriages?' enquired Gwynne.

'Undoubtedly; I married a couple there last week.'

'When was it built?'

'The very year of that marriage we looked up to-day; and that's the very thing that puzzles me about the whole thing. I went back afterwards and looked at the registry again. The other two marriages were so-

lemnised in the new chapel. Tewson's memory is tenacious on one point—that the old chapel was turned into a school-room that spring. Concerning the marriage you speak of, although not very clear about it, he thinks it took place in the school-room.'

'And would such a marriage hold good?' enquired Wyndham hastily.

'I can't say; but I should think not.'

'I suppose neither Tewson nor anyone else knows what has become of the Rev. Arthur Matthews?'

'Tewson certainly don't. I'll make enquiries, Major, and send you the results, if you will give me your address.'

Wyndham scribbled it down.

'And now I must say "Good night." One of the drawbacks of a position, my dear sir—such proprieties to be observed.'

'"Good-bye,"' said Wyndham heartily, as they shook hands. 'Many thanks indeed, for all the assistance you have rendered me. Ah, yes; do oblige me,' he said, as he

saw the little man's eye linger fondly on the cigar-case. 'Put half-a-dozen in your pocket.'

'No, no; many thanks. I might smoke 'em at times, perhaps, in the back garden, but it would be dangerous; I should be safe to be found out. No. "Good-bye,"' —and Mr. Dorridge fled from further temptation.

CHAPTER III.

'A DEATH IN FLEET COURT.'

An early hour the next morning saw Wyndham Gwynne once more on his way to town. He mused much over the information he had acquired. That De Vitre, under his assumed name, had been married in some wise to pretty Luce Schwerin was evident by the registry. Whether the marriage had been sufficiently formal to hold good in the eyes of the law was another thing. To ascertain that, the first step was evidently to find out the whereabouts of the Rev. Arthur Matthews. Well, he would consult his solicitors about it; but he presumed advertising for him was the best thing in the first instance.

Advertise certainly to begin with, ad-

vised Messrs. Rixon and Cudforth; and accordingly the next day, in the second column of the 'Times,' might be seen the following:—

'Arthur Matthews, who followed the profession of a draughtsman in 185— at Lasterton, is earnestly requested to communicate with the undersigned. N.B.—Ten pounds will be given to anyone who can give positive information about the said Arthur Matthews at the present time. Rixon and Cudforth, 70, Lincoln's Inn Fields.'

The second advertisement had but that very morning appeared, when Gwynne received a note from his solicitors to say that the bearer would give him all the information he required. He at once desired that the messenger might be sent up; and, in obedience to his behest, a quiet, respectably dressed man entered the apartment. So little was there remarkable about him, that a student of humanity would have been quite at a loss how to classify him.

He might be almost anything in the lower middle class; nothing in the least to attract your attention, but a somewhat restless eye.

'Messrs. Rixon and Cudforth tell me you can give me all the information I require about Arthur Matthews?' said Gwynne.

'I think so,' replied the visitor, quietly.

'In the first place, then, take a chair; in the second, who are you?'

'Sergeant Bence, Detective Police, Scotland-yard,' and then the sergeant quietly took a seat.

'You came to me, or rather to my solicitors, in consequence of the advertisement?'

'Yes, sir. Of course we always look over that column in Scotland-yard. Well, it so happens I had to reckon up Matthews, or Madison, as he now calls himself, for another gentleman during the summer, so, of course, I knew all about him. I should have been here yesterday, only I thought it better just to run up in the afternoon and see whether he was still in his old lodgings. He is:

there's the address; and if there are any further questions you'd like to ask about him, I dare say I can answer them.'

Wyndham was speedily in possession of such information as the police had furnished De Vitre with in the summer, and felt that he knew quite as much as they did.

'Only one question more, sergeant,' said Gwynne, as he pushed a bank-note across to his visitor. 'May I ask the name of the gentleman who employed you in the summer?'

'No, sir: I can't tell you that; it was a private enquiry, and must be respected as such. Of course, you can always compel us to speak out on public grounds. Meantime, sir, many thanks, and good day.'

The next day Wyndham made his way to Fleet Court, Tottenham Court Road, and, after a few enquiries, found himself face to face with the virago whom De Vitre had had such difficulty in overcoming.

'Does Mr. Madison live here?' he enquired.

'Live here,' said the woman, sharply. 'He's like enough to die here; and whose to pay his back rent, I should like to know? Not you, I'll be bound.'

'Is he very ill, then?' asked Wyndham.

'He's got his old complaint pretty bad. He's had the trembles ever since Monday; and the doctor says if he can't be got quiet, in a day or two it'll kill him. He told him last time if he didn't leave the spirits alone, it would be all over with him. Much attention he's paid to it!'

'He's got delirium tremens, then, has he?'

'I don't know your flash names for it,' retorted the woman. 'He's got the shakes, as comes of over-doses of gin; and he's a chattering all sorts of nonsense to hisself upstairs this minute. He's bin a good lodger, and quite the gentleman always when he had money; but now he ain't, and I'm wore out trying to do for him. May be, if you take an interest in him, you'd advance a pound or two on his account.'

Wyndham hesitated a moment, and then said, 'If I advance you a little money, will you guarantee it's laid out on your patient?'

'Look here, sir,' said the woman, earnestly. 'I'm poor; no need to do more than use your eyes to tell you I speak truth. But I likes Mr. Madison; he's been with us some time, and he's been good to me when he's had money. Anything you give me for him shall be spent upon him. He'll pay me the back rent, perhaps, if he gets round; any way I'll chance that. But get him what he ought to have I can't afford.'

'I believe you; there are three sovereigns. Take the best care you can of him. I will call in again in a couple of days. I want to see him on business in no way hurtful to him.'

'God bless you, sir. I'll do my best,' said the woman, gratefully. 'See him now, you can't—that is, to get any sense out of him.'

'Good day; and don't be uneasy about

the rent. You'll find that will be all right.'

'Good day, sir, and heaven bless you,' and the virago courtesied as Wyndham took his departure.

Not a bad woman at bottom, this poor, unkempt, slatternly creature. She had a violent temper, and found herself married to a shiftless husband, as so many of these hapless women do. Life was a hard fight to her, and her naturally hot temper waxed fiercer as she struggled to keep a roof over her own and her children's heads. But she had a heart of the right sort when she dared trust to it, and as far as laid in her power she nursed her wretched lodger now through his miserable ravings. The money Wyndham had left her was honestly expended on Matthews's behalf. She paid a neighbour to mind the shop that she might devote her time to watching over him. She spent money over broth and other things recommended by the doctor. But it was

of no avail, and on the second day after Gwynne's visit the medical man told her that he thought their patient would never leave his bed again. The fierce delirium was over, but the weakness and prostration that followed were pitiable to see.

'I don't think he'll ever rally,' said the doctor. 'You see, Mrs. Jilson, this is neither the first nor the second attack. All the steel is out of his constitution; there's no vital energy left. Furnace of life burnt out, all but the embers,' muttered the doctor, as he went down stairs. 'Grand organisation naturally, but opium or dram-drinking speedily break up that as a rule. Wonder what he was to start with; evidently a man of good education; quoted the classics freely in his ravings.'

And so this poor creature of 'exigencies' had arrived at the last great struggle of life; when, with eyes looking down the valley of death, the sole want left us is some kindly hand to close them; when our sins and our sorrows,

our joys, and our loves, all blend in one blurred kaleidoscope; when our good deeds seem so infinitely little, and there is nought left us but the boundless mercy of our Creator.

When Wyndham arrived on the second day he found a strange woman in the little shop.

'Sit down a moment, please sir,' she exclaimed; 'Mrs. Jilson is upstairs, and I'll call her at once. She said I was to, if you called.'

A few minutes, and Mrs. Jilson appeared. 'Good morning, sir,' she said as she entered. 'I've done honestly all I could for poor Mr. Madison since you were here last, but I'm afraid it's no good. He'll never get over it. The doctor says so. He's quite in his right senses now, but as weak as water—seems as if he'd no strength left at all.'

'Can he see me? Mind, it is of consequence, he should, if possible.'

'Well, then, after what the doctor says,

you had better see him at once, maybe. But you must be very gentle with him, please sir. I'll just run up and prepare him a bit. What name shall I say?'

'I doubt his having any knowledge of it,' said Wyndham; 'but Grant is my name,' and he gave the *nomme de guerre* he had borne in those old Lasterton days lang syne.

A few minutes and Mrs. Jilson appeared at the door, and motioned him to follow her. 'He didn't recognise your name, sir, that I could see,' she whispered; 'but you'd best go right in now.'

Wyndham opened the door, and gazed round the miserable chamber with which we are already acquainted. On a bedstead, in the corner, reclined the object of his search, welcoming his arrival with a vacant stare from his lustreless eyes.

'You have been very ill,' said Wyndham, as he seated himself by the bedside. 'It may seem unkind to trouble you in your present weak state; but if you can answer

such questions as I may put to you, it may be of the greatest consequence to others.'

He spoke in low caressing tones. What that means—what a soft low voice is to a sick person, only those who have been very ill—sick unto death, can comprehend.

'Don't exert yourself further than to listen,' continued Wyndham. 'I want you to help to do a simple act of justice, if it is in your power. Keep quiet awhile while I recall a few circumstances to your memory. In 185– you were practising as a drawing-master at Lasterton—you were a minister of the Baptist Church at that time. Am I right?'

The sick man nodded assent.

'On the 18th of July in that year you performed the marriage ceremony between Luce Schwerin and Ernest Carlton?'

'De Vitre,' muttered Matthews, hoarsely, as the light came back into his eyes.

'Exactly; but he went under the name of Carlton then?'

'Yes,' murmured the other, and his mouth twitched uneasily.

'That ceremony was performed in what had been the chapel, but which at that time had been converted into a schoolroom. Was that so?'

'Yes,' replied Matthews, faintly.

'Why was that?' asked Wyndham.

'Because De Vitre did not think that would be a legal marriage. Some of that stuff—quick!' gasped the luckless man, as he fell back on his pillow.

Wyndham poured out a glass of the ammonia that stood on the little table, and handed it to him. He swallowed it greedily.

'Go on,' he muttered. 'I am better now. I wish to tell you all about this.'

'Do you think it was a legal marriage?'

'Yes; the old chapel had always been licensed. One marriage indeed had been performed there in January in that year—look at the books, and you will find it so. Schoolroom or not, any marriage performed

in that building that year by a minister I believe to be legal. It was licensed as usual, the new chapel not being open till April.'

'It was odd, very odd, that marriage,' said Wyndham, musingly.

'Not in the least,' cried the dying man, starting up in his bed, and the hitherto lustreless eyes now glittered with excitement. 'Ernest De Vitre would have done her foul wrong, poor thing, if he could; but though she so loved him that he could bend her to his wish in what way he willed, her maiden purity shrank from abandoning herself to him, except as his wife. What did she know, poor child, of our marriage ceremonies here? She loved him, and trusted in him. Little difficulty to persuade her that such ceremonial as he thought fit to go through would be binding.'

'How came it then,' asked Wyndham, 'that a man like De Vitre consented to sail so near the wind as he must have done in this case?'

'Because he had no idea that that old schoolroom was still a licensed chapel; because he dreamt not that I, who read the service that married him, was a minister of the church of which that building was a temple, however humble,' and as he spoke Matthews's eyes gleamed fiercely on his questioner.

'You are over-exerting yourself,' said Wyndham, eyeing him keenly.

'What matter? I know my hours are numbered; I want no doctor to tell me that. What have I to live for—the grave offers the only refuge for men like me? Ah! it was not always so; I had my day dreams once—gone, buried long ago;' and he covered his face with his hands. 'Yes,' he murmured softly, 'how proud they were of me at home when I took a double first at Oxford. I thought the world at my feet then; and this is what it all ends in—death in an obscure court in London.'

He was silent for some time, apparently

LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

wrapped in old recollections, and Wyndham dared not break in upon his musings.

'Ah!' he said, with a start, at last. 'Why don't you ask me more? Give me some of that stuff again, or I may not have strength to answer you.'

Silently Gwynne complied with his request.

'Where was I?' he muttered. 'Ah, yes, the old schoolroom at Lasterton. Let me think. We were talking of her marriage. I can't recollect,' he continued querulously. 'Why don't you ask what you want to know?'

'How came you to perform the ceremony?' said Gwynne, quietly.

'Yes, he never meant that: another was to have gone through the mockery; but I had fathomed the plot. I appeared in his stead; old Tewson let me into the secret. De Vitre had not, as I had counted on, so much brutality in his nature as to object at the last moment. Luce knew me well, and believed me when I told her I was a minister; and so

I joined them in wedlock—I, who would have given my right hand to keep them asunder.'

'Why?' asked Wyndham, in astonishment.

'Oh, can't you see?' replied the other, softly. 'They tell us men can't love now-a-days. I would have given my life for Luce Schwerin at any time. Whether she could ever have loved me, who can say? He came between us. I did venture remonstrance about her imprudence. I spoke bitterly as to what harvest she was sowing for herself. She replied, of course, as a woman who loves would. I had the one chance more to serve her. Her *kismet* was written; but that she should be legally married if possible I swore, and to the best of my belief she was. I have no more to tell.'

'God help you,' said Wyndham, gently. 'What you tried to do for Luce Schwerin should be a comfort to you now.'

'Ah, I was not what I am at present in those days. But I am tired. Give me your

hand. Good-bye. If I have done anything to serve Luce this day it's been a day well spent.'

Wyndham pressed the wan hand extended to him, and passed out of the squalid chamber, around which the wings of the Destroying Angel even now rustled. When Gwynne came next day a mightier visitor than he had been there beforehand, and poor Matthews's fitful struggle with this world was over.

It was the old miserable story. A man of great natural ability and high acquirements, cast on the world with slender resources, had succumbed in the fight from sheer want of bone in his character. The poor groceress his landlady, and Wyndham Gwynne, were the sole mourners that stood at that hapless grave side.

CHAPTER IV

'LUCE ON HER ART.'

SOME thousand years of civilisation! what has it done for us? True it is that for some six centuries or so the world became chaotic, and dedicated itself solely to pulling down, without troubling itself to build up. Is the world much improved since those old days before the dark ages? Who can say? Here we are in Imperial London just as they were in Imperial Rome some two thousand years ago, struggling madly to pile up wealth; striving to outshine our neighbours in dress, equipage, or entertainment; fussing, fuming, jostling one another in the race of life; then comes a whirlwind like that of sixty-six, and the shrieks of those whose avid lust for gold has bid them keep their royals set to the last

moment, ring through the air as their worldly argosies topple over and are engulphed beneath the stormy surge of reckless speculation.

Yes, as Mr. Carlyle says, 'we are like snakes in a bottle, all wriggling about and endeavouring to get uppermost; biting and hissing at one another.'

Wyndham Gwynne lived on a pleasant first floor in Jermyn Street; one of those houses on the south side that, in addition to presenting 'an extensive view of over the way,' also possesses the advantage of affording a sight of St. James's clock. To men who have nothing to do, and who are consequently for the most part feverishly anxious about the exact time, it is impossible to overestimate the luxury of such a look-out. St. James's clock at the West End is an authority that can only be disputed by the Horse Guards'.

Utterly unconscious of this inestimable advantage, never even once glancing towards

St. James's steeple, Wyndham Gwynne lingers over his breakfast immersed in thought. Was this marriage of Luce's down at Lasterton legal or not? That poor creature by whose grave he stood but yesterday undoubtedly deemed it so; but Wyndham himself could not help feeling great misgivings on the subject. But if it was not worth a rush in a legal point of view, it certainly went far morally to remove all stigma from Luce. What could she, a mere girl, and of the Roman Catholic faith, be supposed to know about the marriage ceremonies of a strange people whose creed was not hers? es, poor thing, believing as she did in her lover, she was little likely to challenge the form of their union when he assured her it sufficed.

And then it occurred to Wyndham that he would go down to Islington, and see Luce. Should he tell her the result of his investigations? Yes; he thought so. If he could not honestly say he believed her legally

married, he would at all events admit that she had had reason to deem so herself.

He took a cab, and was soon whirled down to Upper Street, in that traditionally 'merrie' suburb. It's a question, by the way, whether the Islingtonians of this generation would not rather repudiate the epithet 'suburb,' and claim to be quite part and parcel of modern Babylon, as in good faith they may. Bricks! bricks! bricks! And dwellers by green fields and shady lanes in the environs of the huge metropolis may well say the cry is, Still they come. The tentacles of the monster creep ever onwards, continually seizing and appropriating fresh territory, as the ivy gradually lays hands upon the old church tower. Where will it stop? Such tremendous growth of a city even tradition scarce records.

He enters into the shop with a kindly nod to the young women behind the counter. They are accustomed to his visits now, albeit he is still rather a mystery to them, this bronzed bearded man. They have a dim idea that

he is in some way guardian to their mistress; are not quite certain that he has not a share somehow in the business. At first, they had rather put him down as Madame Luce's husband returned after years of residence in foreign parts; then, it was her old lover from whom fate and stern relations had separated her. The shop girls wove quite a pretty romance about it among themselves, terminating in their mistress departing with four horses, attired in gorgeous array that had necessitated their sitting up for three nights to get ready in time, in defiance of all legislation. But as the months wore on, the theory of the four horses was discarded, and they drew the aforesaid misty conclusions with regard to Wyndham and his visits.

'You will find Madame up-stairs, sir, and disengaged,' said one of the girls, in answer to his interrogatory. He knows the way well enough now; and, going up-stairs, taps lightly at the door of the *modiste's* sanctum.

'Come in!' replies the soft voice of the

proprietress. 'Ah, my guardian, I am so pleased to see you!' said Luce, as she rose and gave him her hand. 'I have not seen you this age. But you have been out of town, have you not?'

'Yes,' replied Wyndham as he sat down. And he could but think how pretty she looked in the close-fitting dress of pale blue silk that showed every line of her perfect figure.

'Ah, and you find me in the middle of my sums,' laughed Luce, as she pointed to some portentous ledgers that laid open on the table. 'Such hard work to make the columns balance; but I'll leave them now you are come, and right glad of the excuse.'

'You find the book-keeping troublesome?' said Wyndham, smiling.

'Yes; it is the hardest part of the whole business to me. Nothing, though, now to what it used to be. Oh, dear, what struggles I had with it at first! and then dear old Mr. Donaldson gave me a lesson or two, and he

says now I keep my books beautifully. It's thanks to him, though, all the same.'

'I suppose you were counting over your gains, you mercenary little woman, eh?'

'Yes,' laughed Luce; 'seeing how much there would be for you when you get into trouble. When is it to be? when am I to be called upon to disclose all my riches to you?'

'Never, I trust,' said Wyndham. 'Don't you think playing the fool in such wise once is enough in a man's lifetime?'

'Well, yes; I suppose we ought to grow wise as we grow old,' said Luce sententiously; 'but when I think what some of my customers will wear, in spite of all I dare say to them, I am not quite so sure we do.'

'I fancy you're about right,' replied Wyndham, with a low laugh. 'You must see a good deal of your sex's weaknesses in the way of business.'

'My goodness, yes! Some of them have no eye for colour, and drive me wild with their incongruous fancies. If they'd leave it

to me they would be properly dressed, but they won't. Don't laugh, guardian, but I am as enthusiastic an artist in my way as any of your painters. I detest having to send out a dress that I know is in bad taste, and utterly unsuitable to the wearer. But,' she continued, with a shrug of her shoulders, 'I have to do it.'

'You find them impracticable then at times, Luce?' remarked Wyndham, highly amused.

'Yes, indeed,' she cried, with a little grimace; 'when it comes to pleasing the young ladies who are getting near forty, you don't know how hard it is. Make them understand that what suited them ten or twelve years before will not suit them now, you simply can't. They stopped the clock then,' she continued, laughing, 'and think that everybody else did the same.'

'With all this enthusiasm, Luce, I presume you have favourite clients?'

'Of course I have. There are two sisters,

who are lovely girls, though not rich, and with excellent taste. I would rather make their things for the bare cost of the materials than lose their custom; not but what they are far more liberal than others with far more money.'

'Well, Luce, you must put your art out of your head for a little. I want to talk to you seriously.'

She was seated on a low chair close to the fire, and turned to look at him with a slight expression of astonishment depicted on her mobile features. What could he mean? She said nothing, but waited quietly for him to explain.

'I was down at Lasterton a few days since,' he remarked gravely.

Her cheek slightly paled; there was a quick catch of the breath; and then, in constrained tones, she enquired—

'What took you to Lasterton?'

'Luce Schwerin's wrongs!'

'Hush!' she said. 'Oh, why do you use

the name I have forfeited? Luce Schwerin perished as much as if your kindly hand had not clutched her on the brink of eternity. Think you I would bring such shame upon my people? I am dead to them, dead to all who once knew me, save you.'

'I went down to Lasterton,' continued Gwynne, 'to trace out the story of your marriage. It is odd you never mentioned to me that you knew the minister who officiated.'

'Why should I?' replied Luce, in a low voice. 'He wasn't a minister, only a tool of —of his.'

'There you're wrong. He was veritably what he professed to be—a dissenting minister. I stood by his open grave but yesterday.'

'He is dead, then!' she cried. 'Did he tell you the story of my marriage, such as it was, before he died?'

'Yes, Luce; and what is more, on his death-bed declared his belief that you were as legally wedded as any woman in England.'

'May heaven bless him for that! But what else did you do at Lasterton?'

'I cleared up the whole story of your marriage; and, in the first place, allow me to give you this,' and Wyndham handed a piece of paper across to his companion. 'That,' he said, 'is an attested copy of the registry of your marriage at the Baptist chapel, Lasterton.'

'But I was married in the school-room,' said Luce, with upraised eyebrows.

'Exactly,' and then Wyndham proceeded to explain the whole history of how the school-room for that year still remained a licensed chapel, as he had heard it from Matthews's dying lips.

Luce listened attentively; and, for some little time after he had finished, sat motionless, absorbed in thought. At last she raised her head, and, turning to Wyndham, said, 'Then you think I was really married to him?'

'Morally, no doubt; but whether it is

such marriage as will hold good in the eyes of the law is, I confess, a question about which I have still grievous misgivings. I have done all I can, with the exception of consulting my lawyers on that point.'

'Don't do that, please. You have been very good to me,' and Luce dropped her head upon her hands.

'But why not, you foolish woman?' asked Wyndham hastily.

She did not turn her face towards him this time, but stared steadily into the fire. 'Have you not learnt enough,' she said, 'to acquit me of guilt—to acquit me of ought except the trusting wholly in the truth and honour of one whom I loved better than my life? Recollect, I was but an unfortunate girl in a strange land. Was I to blame?'

'No, you were cruelly deceived; but it is only right to tell you that, if this marriage is good, it was owing to Matthews, and not to De Vitre. Ernest De Vitre never meant to marry you.'

Luce mused for some moments. 'Poor Arthur Matthews,' she said at last. 'He was loyal to me, then, to the end; how I have wronged him! I see it now. He did his best to save me from my folly; and I have ever thought that, out of pique, he lent himself to accomplish my ruin. He would fain have been my husband, you know,' said Luce gently.

'Yes,' said Wyndham, 'I know; but, miserable as was his end, Arthur Matthews was loyal to you with his last breath. Broken, worn out, and dying when he told me this story, he said his day had been well spent if he had done anything that could benefit you.'

The tears stood in Luce's eyes as she thought how she had wronged that quondam lover of hers. 'Yet still,' she continued, earnestly, 'I wish you would move no further in this, my guardian.'

'Why not, you impracticable woman?' exclaimed Wyndham.

'Can't you see?' she exclaimed, passionately. 'My love for him is dead. He did his best to kill it, and I have been all these years wrenching him from my heart. Now that I have succeeded, you come and talk to me of what might have been. It never can be now, I tell you. I never wish to see him again. So that I am justified in your eyes, what more can I want? I owe you everything, and am proud to be your debtor. If you establish my miserable marriage, what good would it do me? You bring together, perhaps, two people who would fain never meet. I want nothing of him—could never be anything to him now. He, the chances are, hopes that I shall never more cross his path. Let me have my way in this, please,' and Luce sank back in her chair, and gave vent to a slight hysterical sob.

'I don't want you ever to live with him,' replied Wyndham, doggedly: 'please yourself about that; but you owe it as a duty to

yourself and family to prove your marriage, if you can.'

'I've been dead to my family so long,' pleaded Luce, tearfully, 'what can it matter now?'

'At all events,' said Wyndham, sternly, 'it's your duty to clear your own character, if you can. A woman's fair fame is not to be thrown away from fantastical notions on her part.'

He had never spoken to her in such fashion before. Luce lifted her tear-stained face, and replied, submissively, 'It shall be as you wish. You would not, I know, pain me unnecessarily. Make it as easy for me as you can.'

Wyndham rose and paced the room. 'Pshaw! what a brute I am,' he muttered. 'Of course she's right. I'm thinking, after all, only of my own object, and not, poor thing, of what is best for her. No, I'll still do it, but it shall be in a different way. I'll

trust to her generosity, and she shall be a confederate, instead of a blind instrument.'

'Listen to me, Luce,' he said, as he sat down beside her. 'You would think it little if I asked you for all your hard-earned money to-morrow; is it not so?'

'You know it is all yours, if you want it,' and the *modiste* gazed with undisguised astonishment into his face.

'Well, you admit I have some little claim on you?'

'Claim!' she cried. 'I owe you every thing I have, including my very existence. Say what you want of me, and see if Luce Schwerin fails you. Ah! why did you recall that name to me? It were better forgotten.'

'Hush! be still, and listen quietly to what I have to tell. A cousin of mine, to whom by her mother's deathbed I swore to be a brother, runs the risk of being fatally compromised by this husband of yours. Will you help me to save her, to watch over her? Will you move in your marriage, or not, as

shall seem good to me? In short, may I count upon you at scant notice to play any *rôle* it may seem right to me to assign you?'

'Wyndham Gwynne,' said Luce, solemnly, as she placed her hands in his, 'if ever the chance comes to me of showing that I am not ungrateful, I claim the right to be told of it. Henceforth I am at your bidding to act in any way you may deem advisable.'

'Thanks. I knew I could depend upon you. Good-bye;' and, for the first time, Wyndham lightly touched her forehead with his lips. 'I shall see you again before long, little woman,' and he turned towards the door.

'Stop a moment, guardian,' exclaimed Luce.

'Well?' he said, pausing, with the door in his hand.

'This cousin of yours. Is she——' and Luce toyed nervously with a bracelet on her wrist.

'Is she what, child?' said Wyndham, sharply.

'Married?' replied Luce, without lifting her eyes.

'Yes, of course. Didn't I tell you so?'

'Ah! yes, I fancy you did,' said Luce, looking up at him with a faint smile; 'but I forgot. Good-bye! Don't be very long before you come and see me again.'

CHAPTER V.

'MRS. ST. LEGER'S PHILOSOPHY.'

MAY has come again, and the great annual British conundrum is once more propounded to a delighted public. Once more the London air teems with rumours of amazing trials and dangerous outsiders. In the clubs, men congregate in little knots, shake their heads, and gesticulate fiercely. In the streets you may see pretty much the same thing, garnished with strong vociferation and idiomatic language concerning the eyes and limbs, which, in the Anglo-Saxon, is a sign of much earnestness of purpose. In Paris these things would mean revolution; in London they simply mean the advent of our 'Isthmian games.' The intellect of the metropolis is absorbed, according to annual custom, in the

stupendous question of 'What's to win the Derby?'

The Mallandaines are once more in town for the season. The change that has come over Cecile since the death of her child is even more marked than it was last year. Then, as now, she sought refuge from herself in the feverish dissipation which it has pleased the London world to designate pleasure, mixing still deeply in that fashionable vortex which excludes all time for reflection. But just as the opiate which once so soothed speedily begins to weaken in its efficacy, so Cecile begins to find this treadmill of fashionable life grow wearisome to her. She begins to suffer from grim periods of reaction. Depression of spirits is now common to her, only to be dispelled by again plunging amid the glittering tinsel of that world she now lives in. She grieves far more than she would like to admit over her estrangement from Lia Remington. I don't mean that there has been a decided quarrel between these two,

but Lia is not to her what she was. They meet, indeed, constantly; but their old frank, true-hearted friendship died away that afternoon in the blue and silver lined boudoir at Childerley.

She ponders often on all this. Time has healed the wound, to a great extent, caused by poor Bertie's death. She still thinks with a shudder of that summer morning when the sunlight seemed to die out of her life; but the morbid idea that it was her neglect that killed her darling gradually grows fainter. The sweet temper which so characterised her seems gone. Cecile is now petulant, capricious, irritable. Discontented with herself and her mode of life, she is unconsciously passing through a great psychological transformation. Under that morbid idea that first possessed her, she took to joining the fastest set in town, as men take to opiates or dram-drinking under adverse circumstances. She wanted to thoroughly drown reflection. Moderate stimulant was

of no use ; she craved for society's absinthe. Now she was suffering from a revulsion of all this. She despised herself in the bottom of her heart, yet fiercely repudiated all advice or sympathy. She would have scoffed at the idea that she and Sir Hervey could ever be aught to each other again beyond the most conventional husband and wife. Yet, though not even as yet admitting it to herself, there lurked in her secret soul bitter regret about the terms upon which they now stood with regard to one another. Though her character had deteriorated of late, Cecile was not blind to the generosity with which Sir Hervey had borne with her follies and caprices.

Yet of late sharp words had passed between the two more than once. Mrs. St. Leger had given occasion for one tourney, and seemed likely to prove a constant source of irritation. Sir Hervey had expressed his disapproval of that lady when at Childerley.

'Naturally,' said Cecile, angrily. 'That she is a friend of mine is, of course, quite

enough to prevent her finding favour in your eyes.'

'You know very well that you are unjust when you say so,' retorted Sir Hervey. 'But when a woman is, to put it mildly, as much talked about in society as Mrs. St. Leger, I confess I would rather not see her a friend of my wife's.'

'And I trust that I shall never be so mean as to abandon my friends because they are calumniated,' returned Cecile, hotly.

Sir Hervey was about to reply in wrath, but mastered himself by a great effort. He was pretty well assured that the world said no more of Mrs. St. Leger than she had given ample occasion for. He only remarked, that he hoped Cecile might never have cause to regret her intimacy with that lady, and went his way.

'Ah, my dear,' said Mrs. St. Leger when in due course she heard in London that she was not looked upon with special favour by the Baronet, 'these men, they

write their histories of religious wars, of wars between nations and races, but of the one great struggle that has been going on since the world began, and which will assuredly last to its close, they say nothing—I mean the struggle for supremacy between the sexes. Do you know why? Because their vanity won't allow that it exists. And yet their histories might furnish them with proofs that we get the best of it pretty often. There's a great historian says somewhere that all Europe was longing for peace at one time, but that three women wished for war, and war it was, my dear.'

'Who was that?' enquired Cecile.

'How should I recollect? Somebody told me so, I think—Egerton Slane, most likely. But there are plenty of historical parallels, and when we come to our own social experiences,' laughed Pauline, 'poor as I am, I think I can afford to bet odds on the women. Only, in nine-tenths of these cases, the mas-

culine mind is not acute enough to see its defeat. I remember Ernest de Vitre putting a volume of "Hervey's Memoirs" into my hands once, that I might read the system by which George the Second's Queen governed England. She always agreed with him to begin with, and he always ended in doing what she wanted, though often diametrically opposite to his original opinion. Men, Cecile, are mere clay in the hands of any woman with brains.'

Mrs. St. Leger was a bitter practitioner, and her teaching little calculated to do Lady Mallandaine good.

Still, that lady, with her accustomed acuteness, had hit off one of the great social problems of the day, when she alluded to the perpetual war between the sexes. It was never more clearly exemplified than now. Whether women are destined eventually to take their place by the side of men in dealing with the affairs of this life is yet hidden in the womb of time; but that, when they do, the

ceremony of marriage will become the mere social contract that it was in the days of Imperial Rome, we have but to look at America to be assured of.

Another thing that was a disturbing force in Cecile's mind just now was that unfortunate debt that she had contracted with Ernest de Vitre. When once debt and habits of extravagance have claimed you for their own, the ten-pound note that is not already forestalled is a *rara avis*. It may be easily imagined, then, that with the best intentions, Cecile had never yet succeeded in getting enough money together to acquit herself of that obligation. She chafes much over this at times. De Vitre laughs lightly on the subject when she alludes to it, declares that it is of no account at present, that she will have no more relentless persecutor than himself when he really wants it, and in the meantime begs she won't even think of it. 'Quite time enough, Lady Mallandaine,' he would say, 'when, getting, in my turn,

impecunious, I claim my bond.' London life constantly presents itself under three aspects —chronic impecuniosity, which lasteth for years; alternate wealth and poverty, which also is long-lived of its generation; Aladdin's lamp, and a catastrophe. The votaries of the latter rarely attain two seasons. But they live by Bendemeer's stream while it lasts—to wish is to have. Sordid cares have they none, and literally their wild revel over, sometimes settle down, and make respectable citizens.

Cecile is aware, since Lia's appeal to her at Childerley, that the world is beginning to look upon her intimacy with De Vitre in a fashion that bodes evil should such intimacy continue. She clenches her hand and stamps her little foot at times, and vows she will not give up, at society's bidding, one of the few friends she has left. Strong in her own sense of rectitude, she defies the world's opinion. That De Vitre is her lover she would probably laughingly admit, but that she is in

love with him she can conscientiously deny. A somewhat warm flirtation goes on between them undoubtedly. She likes Ernest De Vitre, and he must rest satisfied with what she has to give. Not much harm in that flirtation as far as it goes.

Ah, well! there's not much harm in the abstract in playing with fire. It is only when the magazine blows up, the house is burnt down, or somebody gets scorched past recovery, that the full iniquity of the transaction is brought home to us. Cecile is playing with fire, coquetting with the fierce flame of public opinion, putting matches to the fiery passion of an unprincipled man of the world. Many women I wot have toyed less boldly with the fire-king than she, and perished miserably in the conflagration that their folly and vanity have evoked. It is not always passion for her lover that impels a woman to sacrifice herself: public opinion and the jibing sneers of her female friends are just as often the cause of her immolation.

Wyndham Gwynne is a constant visitor in Berkeley Square, equally welcome to Cecile and Sir Hervey. He, like a thorough man of the world, never expostulates with Cecile either by hint or look, yet he is watching over her life now keen-eyed as a hawk. He understands the situation, too, pretty fairly; but to interfere prematurely he judges would be fatal.

'I can never interfere but once,' he argued. 'To do so now would be simply to quarrel with her, and leave me powerless to assist her when she will need all my help. She deems, poor child, in her recklessness, that she can defy public opinion, and has yet to learn what comes of it. She flirts more with De Vitre out of sheer defiance than anything else. To tell her just now that she must either break with Pauline St. Leger or identify herself with that lady and her mode of life, would at present only make her vehemently do the latter. The storm must burst, Cecile, before I can be of good

to you. God grant I may be enabled to fulfil my promise to your mother then. No pander am I to our "social debilities," but fighting public opinion is up-hill work for a man, and generally death to a woman—more especially in such a case as this.'

In those hot-beds of gossip and *chroniques scandaleuses*, the club smoking-rooms, Lady Mallandaine's case had been much discussed of late. Her reckless flirtation with De Vitre was a thing much commented on by the cynics who held forth in those nicotine temples; and the Anti-Lysistrata was rather astonished one night when Egerton Slane rather sharply retorted on one of its members who had laughingly though not offensively alluded to it.

Egerton was, it is needless to say, by no means blind to Cecile's imprudence, but the Mallandaines were intimate friends of his, and he loyally repudiated the charge. It was also an opportunity of differing with somebody, and inflicting a lecture on his pet

hobby of the inferiority of our social system to those that had perished.

'Yes,' he said; 'it is an immutable law that scandal increases proportionately with civilisation. No doubt our ancestors said ill-natured things of each other in their time, and the feminine primitive Briton doubtless whispered it about that her friend was using a cheap and inferior woad such as no real lady would resort to. But still it is not till the later days that the bitterness of our tongues bears fruit. They talked, I take it, as much scandal at the courts of Louis Quatorze and Charles the Second as is well possible; but then you see in those times it did so little harm. Nobody's character was hurt, because nobody made the slightest pretence of having any character. Immorality in the days of the early Georges, if not quite so brazened, was by no means a thing to be ashamed of. It was rather a reflection on a fashionable man to be deemed virtuous, and the reverse militated very little against a

lady. As we go on I rather doubt our improving in morals, but we have made rapid strides in hypocrisy. The more a character is worth keeping, the more it tempts the scandal-mongers of this world to assail it. The dissection of supposititious virtue is a fascinating study to the practitioners of the art, and the demonstrating to the world generally that one of its shining lights is made of very inferior clay indeed, an object of much delight to them. As the child destroys its toy by investigating how it is made, so many a man's character goes down by the rigid search instituted into his early career, with a view, plausible enough, of discovering how he has become what he is.'

'Still I don't see that you're establishing your first proposition, Egerton, that scandal increases in proportion to civilisation,' said Durant.

'Oh, man of little observation, is it not transparent? Does not the press, palladium of British liberty, permeate the land? What

bêtise can one of us commit that is not recorded in the journals. It don't matter much to Tom Smith in his youth that he's been fined 40*s.* for intoxication and knocker-wrenching; but when he is eminent in law, physic, or divinity, how sweet it is to turn up that page in his early career! I am orthodox myself, but if I kissed the barmaid at an inn in North Wales, I shouldn't be surprised at your having it here by telegraph that night, and the morning papers all putting forth a paragraph, headed "Cowardly assault by a distinguished novelist." Lucky if they made no worse of it.'

'I see now what you mean. You mean that in these days our follies or mistakes are so much more likely to be blazoned to the world than they were in days gone by.'

'Exactly; we live, comparatively speaking, under a photographic lens. In these days of locomotion, who can say that his indiscretions will be not supervised by an acquaintance, who departs open-mouthed with the intelli-

gence thereof, panting to disseminate that *historiette*?'

'Egerton, my boy, you're a child of great observation. In an age breathless for news, we journalists must find matter of some kind. Ring the bell, and we'll have something to drink; and beware of osculations with barmaids, Welsh or otherwise.'

'*Si non castè, cautè tamen*,' laughed Slane, as he complied.

CHAPTER VI.

'A COMMUNIST AT HOME.'

GREATLY disturbed in his mind is our old friend Mr. Butters this season. Several things have combined to upset that worthy's equanimity. In the first place, *we've* got out of our usual groove, and are altogether neglecting our pigeon shooting, cricketing, &c.

'Blessed if I know what's come over the Captain,' mutters Butters to himself, as he smokes his solitary pipe in his chamber over the mews; 'but we're doing nothing this year, we aint—damme, nothing. We aint landed a sweep or put a fourer to leg this summer. Never had a pound upon anything. Oh, aint we though,' he continues, with a grimace. 'We hadn't a good thing for the Chester Cup, I s'pose. Yah!' he said; 'to

think that they don't know how to try an 'oss in Yorkshire. Told us it couldn't lose, they did, and it wasn't in the first six. Well, we knew a little more about what our 'osses could do in the days I was in a racing stable.'

This Chester Cup affair was a very sore subject with Butters; who, upon the receipt of some reliable intelligence from some of his old Yorkshire racing chums, had not only backed a north country mare for what was to him a considerable sum, but had also persuaded his master to lose a hundred over the race. And to do the queer, eccentric ex-stud groom justice, he was as much annoyed at his information proving worthless on his master's account as his own.

Then, again, during that autumnal visit at Childerley Mr. Butters had once more succumbed to the fascinations of Mdlle. Suzanne. He had resumed his old intimacy with that young lady, and of course had hailed her arrival in town with considerable zest. But

the *soubrette*, after the manner of other fashionable damsels, was not inclined to smile so sweetly upon her provincial adorer in town as she had done in the country. There are numberless variations of the story of Lady Clara Vere de Vere. Polly Jones who knew you at Margate cuts you dead at Brighton. We can't expect to be recognised everywhere. Think of the old story of the provincial's plaintive remonstrance: 'I had the honour of knowing your lordship in Bath?' 'Ah, and in Bath I shall be happy to know you again.'

The servants, too, at Mr. Remington's house had still further aroused the jealousy of the susceptible Butters, by informing him that Mdlle. Suzanne had got a new beau; and from their description, he had little doubt that his rival was no other than the affable lawyer's clerk he had encountered at Lord's. Brimful of this intelligence, the next time he encountered his perfidious mistress, he angrily taxed her with her faithlessness.

'*Mon Dieu!*' replied Suzanne; 'you tink no one admire me but you? eh, *Tiens.* Would you like to know how many lovers I have?—one, two, tree. *Je suis coquette, moi.* When you stoopid, Mons. Bouttare, as you vary often am, I write a leetle *chiffe* to some one else, you understand. He make de *promenade* with me. When *vous êtes aimable*, I walk wid you,' and the French woman gave a saucy toss of her head, and favoured Mr. Butters with a most coquettish glance of her dark eyes.

'Very good,' said that worthy, grimly; 'then I won't trouble you again, Maamzelle. When the running's so in and out as all that comes to, it aint mostly to be relied on. You'd better send for Mr. Flip—what's his name, at once.'

'Ah, *non*, you take me one leetle *promenade* dis evening, is it not so?' said Suzanne, in her most insinuating manner.

But Mr. Butters was stern as granite on this occasion, and departed in his wrath, with

as many muttered allusions to serpents and crocodiles as would have sufficed a high priest of Isis.

It may be laid down as an axiom, that your truly great men ever shrink from making any parade of their greatness. As far as may be, they infinitely prefer treading their weary way through this world unnoticed and unknown. Now Mr. Flippington was one of these heroic souls. Although he had arrived at the very summit of his profession, although he was well aware that not only the eyes of his own, but of one or two other somewhat inimical professions were fixed upon him, yet so much did he deprecate the ovation usually paid to greatness, that he preferred as a rule travelling incognito. With a playfulness and versatility highly creditable both to his heart and his head, he was fond of personating some one in the lower walks of life. Like the disguised caliph, he picked up much knowledge of men and manners during these excursions;

and having, like a true artist, his whole soul bound up in his profession, was wont at times to electrify the public with the results of his studies. There was no mistake about Flippington's touch; all the great connoisseurs recognised his handiwork at a glance. It was while upon one of these excursions he had made acquaintance with Mdlle. Suzanne. Struck with that young lady, he had prosecuted the acquaintance with considerable ardour. Mademoiselle was nothing loth. Flirtation was to her as the air she breathed; and she felt quite equal to cope with any amount of admirers. Moreover, their intimacy had commenced during her first quarrel with Butters.

'May lead to nothing, my dear,' said Flippington to her who was the real custodian of his heart; 'but it never does any harm studying an interior.'

Speech mystical indeed until you are made aware of what profession the distinguished Flippington is incorporated with.

Flippington is a communist, or as the police more coarsely describe him, a burglar; and if not the first, is certainly one of the first three artists in London. Amongst his own people he is known as 'The Count,' a *sobriquet* indicative of the polished and cultivated manners he shows as contrasted with his associates. 'The Count' has cultivated the fair Suzanne in a most purely professional view. He has been inside the house in Eaton Square; studied the interior; in short, ascertained how many servants there are, where they sleep, where the pantry is, &c. He has reckoned it all up, has even seen and appraised the plate, but his verdict is that it will not do—that there is too much risk involved. It is a shocking comment on the heartlessness of man, but had not Mdlle. Suzanne happened accidentally to allude to the villa at Twickenham, Mr. Flippington was on the verge of dropping her acquaintance; but that made him prick up his ears, even as the war-horse responds to the

trumpet. If there was one branch of his art more than another for which Mr. Flippington felt a weakness, it was 'doing' a villa in the suburbs.

'They're the nicest cribs to crack out,' he would say, enthusiastically. 'Quiet, comfortable, no noise, no unpleasantness, no great distance to go, and on the whole pay fairly.'

So he still worships at the shrine of that fair enchantress, with motives she understandeth little. But the Count is keenly on the look-out for the time when it may please the family to betake themselves to their water-side abode. To a great artist like Flippington it would appear a blunder of magnitude to be premature in 'doing a villa.' He is waiting for the intelligence that that plate which seems so out of reach in London shall be transferred to Twickenham. He would prefer also that one of his own people should be domesticated in the house, and has ready one of his cleverest coadjutors in the event of the Remingtons requiring a footman. To

his great patience has been due the Count's wonderful success as an artist. It is the labour after all, you see, that produces work of mark in every trade.

To say that Flippington was unknown to the police would almost involve a stigma on his character. Far from it! And yet they had but once succeeded in laying hands on him. He had arrived at the mature age of twenty-six, and, marvellous to relate, had but one conviction recorded against him. Two years in Pentonville had expiated that blunder—the crime of being found out—as he would have spoken of it. A thief from his boyhood, the detectives had often little moral doubt whose iniquities they were called upon to trace out; but with that one exception he had defied conviction.

Cunning as a fox, gifted with extreme *hardiesse* and a perfectly Protean knack in the way of disguises, the Count had so far defied the sleuth hounds of the law. He utterly declined to work with any but those

quite at the top of the profession. 'The fewer in it then,' he was wont to say, 'the better;' and he placed implicit belief in the talents of his mistress, and would undertake nothing that had not been well talked over in her presence, and of which she had not vouchsafed her approval.

Let us look at the Count at home. Don't be afraid; I am not about to take you into low publichouse or flash night-cellar. In a comfortably-furnished first floor in Brompton resided Mr. and Mrs. Woodhouse, the *nomme de guerre* under which the Count and his lady passed. Mdlle. Suzanne would have been infinitely puzzled to make out Mr. Flippington, lounging in an easy-chair and tranquilly perusing a magazine by the light of a moderateur lamp. Instead of the luxuriant dark curls and moustache, with which she was familiar, she would have seen a close-cropped head of brown hair, and a keen physiognomy destitute of whisker or moustache. Opposite to him was a woman,

rather too gaily dressed perhaps; a weakness for colour perceptible in her attire certainly; but, still, whose clothes fitted her shapely form extremely well. She was young, not exactly pretty, yet with a pleasant face withal. Glossy brown hair and bright eyes of the same colour went far to atone for her somewhat irregular features. She was busied about some feminine work, as tranquilly as any matron in the land might be. And yet she was a convicted thief, and at this present mistress of a notorious burglar.

'Let's have something to drink, Polly; and where's my pipe?' asked the Count, as he threw the magazine from him.

'All right; I'll find it in a moment,' and the Countess, as she was habitually called in the profession, proceeded to extract a bottle of brandy from the cupboard, rang the bell for some glasses, and then commenced to search about the mantelpiece for the missing meerschaum.

'There, Jim, you'll do now,' she said, as, after filling his pipe and mixing him a tumbler of brandy-and-water, she resumed her seat.

The Count smiled silently for a little, then rousing himself, said, 'What's that you're doing, Polly?'

'Economising, Jim,' said the girl, with a laugh. 'Furbishing up an old bonnet, to make it look like a new one.'

'Why, there's plenty of the ready left yet; aint there?' he retorted, eagerly.

'Oh, yes, never fear; but, you see, you havn't a job that looks clever in hand just now, and I don't want it to be "a must" with you, Jim. That's how we come to trouble mostly. We get hard up, and have to go in for what comes to hand, just to carry on with, instead of waiting for something safe. I don't mean to lose my man, if I can help it. That's the reason I'm beginning to be a bit careful now.'

'You're a real good girl, Polly,' said the

Count. 'I always have said there's not another like you.'

The woman rose, and came and sat upon the arm of his chair. 'I've been good to you, Jim; I know it. Why won't you marry me?'

A queer weakness you will think, perhaps, for this girl, a convicted thief, to have; but she loved her crime-stained partner as much as if they had been both immaculate. It takes a long time to stamp the capacity for love out of a woman's breast; and, while it exists, they ever crave to have that love legalised.

'What do you want me to marry you for?' enquired the Count, with indignation. 'Isn't it just the same as if we were? Don't I treat you just the same as if I were married to you?'

'Yes, but I'd like to be all the same, Jim. You see I couldn't give evidence against you then, whatever happened.'

'Give evidence!' muttered the Count,

hoarsely, as he put down his pipe. 'Look here, my lady; if I thought you'd ever round on me, you'd never see another sunrise. Don't you know it's our duty to be topped on the drop, if it comes to the worst, without speaking? Now, don't begin napping your bib. I don't think for a moment you would; so why do you aggravate me by talking about it?'

The girl brushed away a tear or two, and quietly resumed her original seat and occupation.

The Count smoked on again for some time in silence; at last he finished his brandy-and-water at a gulp, and then observed—

'I think, Polly, this Twickenham plant will be rather good business when it does come off. I had another look at the plate again the other day, and it's even better worth lifting than I thought.'

'And it'll be an easy job too when you get it all in training. Did you see your French sweetheart to-day, Jim?' and the

smile upon her lips showed that she, at all events, stood in no fear of Suzanne's attractions.

'Yes. Lord! what a fool that girl is. She's that vain of her face and figure that there's nothing you couldn't persuade her to by flattery. I told her to-day that there was a poor fellow I should be glad to give a lift to, if she should hear of a vacancy for a footman.'

'And what did she say?'

'Oh, promised to help me, if she'd a chance; and, what's more, said she thought it likely there might be a vacancy in her own family before long.'

'The very thing. Don't do Twickenham, Jim, till you have got him there. It's well worth waiting a little longer to have a screen inside.'

'Yes; besides, it's no use till the pewter moves down there. Did you go to the Feathers to-day?'

Polly nodded.

'See Abel?' enquired the Count.

'Yes; he's all right. He'll be in the way when wanted. In the meantime, he said, he'd just brush up the footman game a bit; he hasn't played it very lately, and is afraid he's grown rather rusty at it.'

'Ha!' exclaimed the Count, exultingly, 'that's something like a pal to work with. He'll spend a week or a fortnight, as they say, at the theatres, "recovering the part;" and he too, mind, the very best footman we ever had in the profession. Lord! Polly, do you recollect that little crib we cracked down at Richmond, some few years ago, and how, after Abel had seen us well over the wall with the pewter, I went back, and turned the key on him when he had got into his room again? There they found him next morning, tucked in, and a big handkerchief, smelling very strong of chloroform, on the pillow beside him. Hah! hah! they never twigged he was in it. Chloroformed in his sleep, poor fellow, and then locked in.

I think I see him giving his evidence now before the magistrates. What a game it was. Hah! hah!'

'Yes,' said Polly, quietly; 'but it was a deal too venturesome. It was clever of him to think of having a swelled face, and so tying himself up in a handkerchief before he went into court. But Abel has had his picture taken, recollect; and there's one or two in Scotland-yard who, if they had happened to be there, might have recognised him.'

'I believe you're about right, old woman,' remarked the Count, after a short pause; 'about time to turn in, isn't it?'

'Yes; I'm off now, and I'm sure I'm right. Rashness is not business, Jim;' and, with this orthodox remark, Polly lit her candle and disappeared; an example which, after ten minutes' rumination, the Count followed.

You may think this picture of the burglar at home rather overcoloured. If you study the history of the great robberies of the last

twelve months, you will find that I have not departed much from real life. Civilisation in some measure extends to crime; and the beetle-browed ruffian, although still in full bloom, has no pretensions to be reckoned a first-class thief. These latter mostly dress well, live well, have a fair amount of education, and deem violence, except in the greatest emergency, a terrible mistake. The landlady of the Woodhouses thought that the gentleman was connected with the turf, and that the lady had some music-hall engagement. Such was the view taken of the couple in the neighbourhood. And, as their rent and other bills were always discharged with undeviating regularity, of course they were looked upon as highly respectable.

Burglary, after all, is but communism divested of hypocrisy.

CHAPTER VII.

' DISENCHANTMENT.'

Amid the manifold ramifications of our social system, there seem to be born men and women to whom from their cradles are assigned the destiny of the children of Shem. Predestined from their birth to live at war with society—their hand against everyone, everyone's hand against them.

As children, their relations predict evil of them. They pass their lives battling against such premature judgment; and when one of these Bohemians at last, despite prophecy, raises himself on a lowly pedestal, the unbelievers are apt to fall down and worship. It is astonishing how the good points of your character are evolved by success in life—at all events, in the eyes of the bystanders.

I am not quite clear, as an end to climbing the world's ladder, whether tact is not better than talent. If social triumphs only be the end, I should not hesitate to say give me the former for choice. Better still, perhaps the faculty of adaptiveness. When you are equally ready to play with the children or walk out with the lapdogs, there is little the matrons of England will not do for you. There are men you meet everywhere, their face wearing a perpetual simper, welcomed in good houses far and wide, who have won their position in this wise. They have made children a study, and are entitled to a certificate vouching for their medical skill amongst poodles.

Pauline St. Leger from childhood had been one of these Arabs of society. Difficult to say much in her defence in these times; yet let us just glance back at Pauline in her girlish days, and see how she became what she now is. The bold, reckless, handsome *intriguante* that we know had not been always

such. She, too, had had her dream of love—a real, genuine, honest passion; and when the veil was rent rudely asunder, and she found that her idol was of the earth, earthly, then she vowed vengeance on man generally—vowed that they should be to her but as pawns on the chessboard of life, among which, queen as she was by nature, she would spread havoc and devastation. Admirers she had had countless. She kept them little longer than they could minister to her extravagance. Talked about she always was, but she was a woman subtle in her generation. She would go great lengths, but she never crossed the rubicon. She fooled men to the top of the bent, but there was a limit that she never overstepped. Her elopement had been predicted divers times with divers men, but somehow it never took place; and, singular to relate, she retained as friends the majority of her old admirers. Year after year still found her holding her own in the London world. Virtuous matrons

shuddered at her name, especially those with sons just launched upon the town. Still Mrs. St. Leger was to be met at most places, and was a welcome guest at some of the best houses in Belgravia. She was a clever woman. Many as the enemies were that she made, yet she had far too much tact not to conciliate several of her own sex. It was told of her that when the young Marquis of Blazington first came out and horrified his mother, the Duchess of Salamanca, by his wildness and devotion to Mdlle. Coralie of the French plays, that Pauline quietly remarked, upon becoming the *confidante* of that affrighted matron, 'Leave him to me, duchess. Let me take care of him for a season. He'll come to no harm in my hands, and be quite able to look after himself in future.' It's a very scandalous world, and there was probably no truth in the story; but the fact nevertheless remained, that the Marquis broke with Mdlle. Coralie, was most devoted to Mrs. St. Leger for a

season, and far more indifferent to feminine attractions at the termination of their *liaison.* The Duchess, moreover, still remained a fast friend of Pauline's.

Mrs. St. Leger sits in her pretty little drawing-room this morning in a most meditative mood. Her fair cheek rests upon her hand, and her dark eyes are gazing far back upon her early life. She is thinking of how she first came home from that *pension* at Paris to be installed as mistress of her father's house,—that disorderly bachelor establishment, to which though she soon succeeded in giving order, she had been powerless to attract any of her own sex. Among all her father's nondescript acquaintance her husband and Ernest De Vitre had stood out pre-eminent. Thorough men of the London world, they both bore the unmistakable stamp of good society imprinted upon them. They were both good-looking men; each paid Pauline great attention. She was young, very weary of her life in that ramshackle old

mansion. What wonder that she hailed their visits with delight. But the cold, worldly woman we know now was at that time a warm, impressionable, imaginative girl. It may easily be imagined that she soon made her selection between these two, and he to whom she gave her heart was not the one to whom she afterwards gave her hand.

It happened in this wise. Pauline, still looking back over the shadowy retrospect of her ruined life, can conjure up the whole scene as if it were but yesterday. Do we ever lose such memories? She sees that winding path through the coppice, that led down to the water, through which they strolled that delicious summer evening; the drowsy hum of the insects is yet in her ears. She had been so worn and wearied by her solitude. How her heart had jumped when De Vitre had arrived unexpectedly to dinner! How quick it beat as she strolled out with him afterwards! She could see now that fallen tree by the lake upon which they

had sat. She recollects so well throwing her hat at her feet, and how he had whispered she did right—that it had no business to obscure the glories of her hair. Then nervous and unstrung, she recalled how she had dropped her head on his breast, and with an hysterical burst of tears owned her love, and besought him to rescue her from the dreariness of her life.

Ernest De Vitre has plenty of sins to answer for, but, to do him justice, he was thoroughly taken aback upon this occasion. It had never occurred to his selfish nature that what he looked upon as a pleasant flirtation might be taken *au sérieux* by an isolated girl like Pauline. Cool, calm, and selfish, he had plenty of capacity for behaving like a very brute to a woman when he deemed occasion required it. In this instance, to do him justice, he was as much distressed as it was in his nature to be. He had tact, and plenty of brains. In a second he determined to spare the girl the humiliation of rejecting

her proffered love. He kissed her, dried her eyes, and walked back to the house her affianced husband. Pauline retrod that winding path on air, and laid her head on her pillow with a happy smile parting her coral lips.

De Vitre at the same moment, with a cigar between his teeth, was gazing out of his window, and murmuring—

'Dev'lish awkward! Of course it's all bosh; it can't be. How am I to break it to her? By Jove! how handsome she looked to-night! She'd make a London drawing-room stare. But then she hasn't a shilling, and a wife without money is a luxury I can't afford, even if I could make up my mind to resign my freedom.' It must be borne in mind that he had not succeeded to his uncle's inheritance in those days. He mused for some time as he sucked lazily at his cigar, and at last, throwing the stump away, murmured—'Yes; I must break it to her, that this evening's work is all a mistake; but

whether before I go to-morrow or in a week hence, I'm not quite clear about. The sooner the better, I fancy. Time enough, at all events, to decide to-morrow morning.'

And in the shrubbery next morning Pauline was made aware that her dream was over. She entered that maze of evergreen, love lighting her eyes, love playing round her lips, her heart throbbing in unison. In little more than half-an-hour she left it with colourless cheeks, bitter tears flowing from her passionate eyes, and a sore gnawing at the heart-strings. Well she might! She had passed half-an-hour under the knife, and however tenderly the surgeon's hand may wield it, there are sore suffering and shock to the system in a great operation. The cutting down and cauterizing of a first love is not a slight affair to a warm-hearted, impassioned girl who loves in earnest.

To do De Vitre justice, he had striven to break the fact that their engagement must be looked upon as void as gently as possible.

But it is hard to blind a quick-sighted girl, with every sense preternaturally sharpened by love. Ere their interview was over, Pauline learnt that she had been exchanging gold for counters the night before.

'Yes,' she muttered, as she hurried towards her own room; 'I could have waited, aye, worked, but he cares little for me. It was but pity made him speak as he did yesterday. Was it right that he should spend so much time in teaching my foolish heart to beat for him? Our first lessons seem always harsh. Ernest De Vitre, you have taught me what man's love may be valued at.'

Neither a just nor a logical conclusion, but from a woman whose feelings were sorely wrung, such was hardly to be expected.

A few months afterwards Pauline married Oxley St. Leger; liking him well enough, but loving him not in the least. His position secured her a fair start in the London world, and her own talent and beauty did the rest. She speedily became the rage; and then it

was that De Vitre, who had kept carefully aloof from her all these months, became her firm ally. He knew better than to attempt to rekindle the love he had so ruthlessly killed, and there had been no *tendresse* again between these two. At first, Pauline mistrusted him. Woman is so loath to believe that her fascinations are powerless. She feared he was about to assume the *rôle* she was once so anxious he should have played. But De Vitre never alluded to the past. He felt that he owed her some atonement, and was an unwearying friend to her in those early days. She had the benefit of all his shrewd knowledge of this London world placed freely at her disposal. It was he who forced the gates of more than one house to which she had despaired of attaining the *entrée*. His advice and assistance were ever at her command; and so there sprang up between them that frank spirit of *camaraderie* known, I verily believe, only to the Bohemians and free lances of this world.

Oxley St. Leger, at the time of his marriage, had still some money, besides good expectations; but, for some years now, he had lived pretty much on the latter. Mysteries these men who are perpetually floating on, and disappearing beneath, the stream of society. They never drown altogether, though ofttimes cast up on the bank in woful plight. Yet twelve or eighteen months afterwards we meet them again—a smile on their face, a flower in their button-hole, and not a care in the world apparently to trouble them. St. Leger had gone through the usual course. The pigeon had ripened into the rook, and had picked up its food in varied and somewhat questionable form. Occasionally, for a brief period, he took refuge in his wife's house in May Fair, though even then they saw but little of each other.

But Mrs. St. Leger rouses herself from these old memories of the past, and begins to think seriously over the evils of the present.

She is over head and ears in debt, though that perturbs her but little; but that she has apparently come to the end of her credit, does a good deal. When you have neither credit nor cash life is wont to become difficult, especially when regarded from Mrs. St. Leger's point of view. Sir Alberic Hungerford proved himself a very fair banker; but at present, as she well knows, that devoted Baronet is labouring under a severe attack of impecuniosity, and is as much at a loss where to look for a hundred pounds as herself. De Vitre! yes, since he has had money, he has never refused her, but she hates applying to him; and a mocking smile comes over her face as she wonders how much she really owes him at this present moment.

'Ah!' she murmurs softly; 'and I shall have this to deal with first,' and she glances at a bouquet and bracelet that lay on the table beside her. 'Poor fellow! he's the only one of them all whose love was ever

worth having, and I will show him I think so. Only that I feel my London career is over, I don't think that I should have heart to give him his dismissal. Time he was here,' she muttered, as she raised her eyes to the pendule.

The door opens almost as she turns her gaze from the timepiece, and Roland Dance is ushered into the room.

'Ah,' he said, after the usual greeting, 'you have got the bracelet back again, I see. Jameson's people promised me you should have it this morning, but they are such unblushing liars that I own I had my misgivings.'

'They have made a very good job of it. Come here, and put it on for me,' and Pauline held out the bangle towards him. 'I've to thank you for those flowers, too,' she continued, as he clasped it on her wrist; 'they are delicious, and you know how I do love flowers.'

'I'm glad you like them,' said Dance,

quietly; 'I think I know most of your likes. I'm sure I should, if studying them has had aught to say to it; but you are a capricious woman, Pauline, and what you like to-day you may not like to-morrow.'

'Silence, sir; how dare you utter such a libel? and if I am capricious, I don't choose to be told so. Have you yet to learn that we bear no allusions to our faults, excepting you disguise them as virtues? When you designate our meanness, prudence; our stupidity, reticence; our extravagance, generosity; and call our dissipation the natural result of high spirits, then, indeed, we listen with tolerable patience.'

'Then, I suppose, you never wish us to tell you the truth,' rejoined Dance, smiling.

'Well, I don't know,' said Pauline; 'I'm not sure as a rule that we do, unless it tends very much to our own glorification. On one point I'm sure we would much sooner hear you lie than otherwise. That is when you make love to us. However much in

earnest you may be, I don't believe a woman would be ever satisfied unless you exaggerated immensely. That is the difficulty you labour under when your passion is genuine. Your faculties are engrossed, and your imagination waxes dense. You are at your best when about half in love. You know you are very nice to me, Roland,' said Mrs. St. Leger, suddenly flashing her black eyes upon him.

'And you know equally well that no half love is mine,' interrupted Dance, warmly; and his voice certainly denoted earnestness of purpose.

'No,' she replied, quietly, 'I don't suppose you have got quite so far. Hush!' she continued, raising her hand to stop a frantic protestation of passion. 'Don't be rude—I won't be interrupted in my speech, more particularly when I am discoursing to you in parable. I have told you that I love you: when I told you so I lied;' and throwing herself back in her chair, Mrs. St. Leger

gazed curiously at him, to see how he would take that terse announcement.

Roland said nothing; he was in some measure used to these fierce outbursts on her part—to hear Pauline rail at the world and the love of man was nothing new to him. Hardly as she had often used him, there had always been some tenderness in her manner towards himself. To-day those low, distinct, tremulous tones that he knew so well, were changed for a voice clear, cold, and measured. She spoke like one who had nerved herself to some set purpose. His heart died within him. Mockery, really, as he knew this love of his to be, it had so incorporated itself with his life that he felt the stunning sensation of a man about to undergo sentence for a grievous offence. He turned uneasily in his chair, and looking her straight in the face, waited to see what she might say next.

'You don't answer me,' she said, at length.

'Go on,' he muttered.

'Do you know why I sent for you to-day?'

'I am beginning to guess,' he answered, roughly.

'Ah!—it was to shiver your illusion into fragments: to make you hate me possibly. To tell you that I am ruined, and the chances are that this London world will know me no more.'

'Such love as mine deserves better treatment, Pauline. I won't believe you,' he cried, passionately. 'I'm a poor man, worse luck, but still, such help as I can give is yours.'

'Yes; I know all that, Roland,' she replied quietly; 'and I tell you once again that you are to me but as other men—a puppet, the strings of which it has amused me to pull. You may hate, despise me, but one thing bear in mind—free lance and plunderer as I am,' and no words can describe the bitterness of her tone, 'I have

spared you, with the exception that I have lured you on to love a woman who has no heart to give.'

'And that's your idea of mercy?' he interrupted, fiercely.

'Yes,' she said, sadly, 'that is what I have come to. It was otherwise with me once. If you knew the whole story of my life, I think you would, perhaps, own that circumstances have had much to do with making me what I am. Now go,' she said, rising. 'It is best so. I deemed it well for your sake that you should know the truth before we parted. It will assist you to forget ——'

'Forget—I would I had never seen you, Pauline.'

'It would, perhaps, have been better. Adieu, Roland,' she said, extending her hand; 'you will shake hands with me once more, won't you? Ah, that's good of you. Good-bye; think kindly as you can of the worthless woman for whom you have professed so much love.'

Dance pressed her proffered hand, and passed out of the presence of the woman who had so long alternately petted and tortured him. His eyes had rested on her noble face and stately figure for the last time. He is destined never to see her again. Nevertheless, no one ever took her place in his heart. I don't mean to say that he did not get over his misplaced attachment, but no woman was ever so fair in his eyes, nor was the lesson she read him ever forgotten. It left him sceptical on the subject of the sex, and it may be with a tinge of that feeling which Béranger has so happily expressed :—

> Mais elle avait pour me charmer
> Ma jeunesse que je regrette,
> Ah ! que ne puis-je vous aimer
> Comme autrefois j'aimais Rosette ?

Mrs. St. Leger threw herself back in a chair as he left the room, and covered her face with her hands. The tears stood in her

eyes when she dropped them some few minutes afterwards.

'All but crying, you fool,' she murmured; 'and merely because you've dismissed a lover. Oh, dear! this being good is very unsatisfactory work: I'm afraid I'm more adapted for wickedness. Ah, well! Roland has gone away discomfited, but he has had his triumph, if he did but know it. He's the only man that I have grieved over since,—since,—ah! since a summer evening a life-time ago.'

CHAPTER VIII.

'LADY TRILLAMERE'S FÊTE.'

It would be a curious thing to ascertain what percentage of celebrated *mots* were uttered quite unconsciously by perfectly matter-of-fact people. My own impression is that something like twenty-five per cent. of such sayings were elicited in this wise, or were manufactured next morning from the recollected coruscations of last night's entertainment. It is so very easy to think out the retort you should have made on such occasions; it is so very easy the next afternoon to tell it as having been made either by oneself or somebody else.

Only a few weeks ago I recollect being much amused with a dun received by a friend of mine. It was from a very respect-

able hatter—a man whose soul was absorbed in hats; who, if you represented to him that you were going to Ultima Thule, or anywhere else, was immediately unravelling the problem of what hat would suit that locality. 'Going to Barbadoes, are you, sir?' I once heard him say. 'White 'at, of course, sir. Must have an 'at, sir, you know.' If he had heard of a customer *in extremis*, I could have fancied him saying—'Going to heaven, is he? dear me, sir! must have an 'at. Blue one of course, sir. I'll have one ready in three days.' However, to return to this epistle. After a pathetic appeal for money in some form, he went into the secrets of his business, and remarked—'You must be aware, sir, that such long credits do not pay.' The graceless culprit gave a loud guffaw, turned down the page, and wrote on the other side—'Ha! ha! Damme, you've seen it at last! Right you are!' Now that hapless hatter wrote his *double entendre* without the slightest knowledge thereof.

When Lady Harrington, who having, by dint of rouge, ribbons, diamonds, and effrontery, succeeded in making herself look far more like a Moll Flanders than a peeress, complained to George Selwyn at the coronation of George III. that she would have to walk with Lady Portsmouth, who would have a wig and a stick:—'Pooh!' said he, 'you will only look as if you were taken up by the constable.' Quite unconscious, that flaunting peeress told Selwyn's *mot* everywhere. She thought the reflection was on Lady Portsmouth. Though not the author, she was the disseminator of the joke, and many similar cases might be adduced. I include, by the way, the unconscious disseminator in my category. So many good sayings would have perished had they not been embalmed by the unwitting victims themselves.

The Mallandaine *manège* has got considerably out of gear. It is no secret to their

intimates, and even the world at large are now conversant with the fact that Sir Hervey and his young wife are troubled with domestic dissensions. The Baronet's eyes are at last thoroughly open to Cecile's reckless flirtation with De Vitre, and the passion of jealousy is now vouchsafed to him as a break to the monotony of existence. Despite their differences, Sir Hervey, as we know, sincerely loves that foolish young wife of his. He is not a man to give way to the violent paroxysms of the malady, but he quietly expostulates.

'It would be as well I think, Cecile,' he says, 'if you saw a little less of De Vitre. It doesn't take much to set the London world talking, and he is here rather more than is judicious. I don't in the least mean you to drop him, but you might be a little more sparing of your invitations.'

'It seems that very few of my friends are fortunate enough to meet with your appro-

bation,' retorted Cecile, warmly. 'Yesterday it was Pauline St. Leger; to-day it is Mr. De Vitre.'

'Your intimacy with Mrs. St. Leger I have no hesitation in saying I don't approve. I don't mean to go further. In De Vitre's case I do. I tell you fairly that he must come here less frequently. I leave it to your own tact to carry out my wishes. I won't appeal to your duty as a wife to forward my desire in this matter, but I simply appeal to your common sense. You can do it yourself easily. If I have to interfere, it will be done, but clumsily. But done I intend it shall be.'

'Then I presume I had best give Mr. De Vitre his *congé* upon his next appearance?' exclaimed Cecile, with flashing eyes.

'You don't think anything of the kind,' replied her husband. 'You know perfectly well you can do what I ask you without taking any such arbitrary measures. I

am afraid our marriage was a mistake, Cecile. God knows I meant that your life should be a happy one; but we seem to understand each other less every day,' and the Baronet dropped his head upon his hand wearily.

For a few seconds Cecile was troubled with compunctions. But Pauline St. Leger's evil counsel still rang in her ears. 'The early state, my dear, of most marriages is war for the supremacy. Until you have established the right to know whom you like, and visit where you like, you are not a free woman. The English husband is Mohammedan in theory, although he nominally restricts himself to one wife—probably out of deference to the laws of his country. But of that one wife he takes a purely Eastern view: she is his slave, if he can make her so.'

Mrs. St. Leger, you perceive, was an advanced advocate of woman's rights; though

whether her views are conducive to domestic felicity is perhaps questionable.

'I can't see,' said Cecile at last, with a little hard laugh, 'how estranging me from all my friends is to tend much to my happiness.'

'I have always thought,' replied Sir Hervey, quietly, 'that Lia Remington was your greatest friend. She used to be welcome here as flowers in May time. I seldom see her now—why is that? Recollect she's dear to me as to you. If you've forgotten what she was to us at the time of your illness, I have not.'

'Oh, I don't know,' replied Cecile, nervously. 'Lia and I have got a little wrong somehow. We are not quite the friends we used to be.'

Sir Hervey had driven a bolt home this time. Her estrangement from Lia was one of the things that Lady Mallandaine was wont to ponder sadly over; all the more

that she was conscious of being in fault on that subject.

'It's no use saying any more, Cecile,' observed the Baronet, rising. 'We seem to be less *en rapport*, as the mesmerists say, than ever. I only ask you to bear in mind what I have said.'

'Certainly. I will delicately give my friends to understand as early as possible that I am not permitted to see them under my own roof,' retorted Lady Mallandaine, bitterly. 'You need be under no apprehension that it will not be done with all the tact you are so good as to credit me with.'

Sir Hervey's face darkened; he felt the sneer, and turned at the door, but mastering himself with an effort, he simply replied—

'Thanks; you will oblige me much,' and left the room.

Wide apart as they seem, those two, there is little between them in reality. But the alkali

that would neutralise the acidity of nature Lady Mallandaine insists on displaying is not as yet forthcoming. Opposition does but harden Cecile in her iniquities. As Wyndham Gwynne said, the storm must burst over her head before she will listen to the advice of her friends. Meanwhile the barometer is falling apace, and Lady Mallandaine has Pauline St. Leger for pilot. Was ever the rudder of a ship in worse hands!

Could Sir Hervey have glanced into Cecile's own room ten minutes after that interview, he would have seen his wife stretched on her sofa, and giving vent to passionate sobs. She was angry with him, angry with herself. Why was he so cold and bitter to her? and why, oh why, did he taunt her about her quarrel with Lia? Ernest De Vitre was her friend; had he not saved her child's life? How dare people talk about her intimacy with him? and this to Cecile seemed an out-

rageous grievance. Flirted with him she had in a way, she knew; but did not other women in London flirt also, and far more reprehensibly than she? She felt that she did not care about him, and so held herself innocent. Girl as she was, she had yet to learn that a woman may be so compromised in such flirtation, that at last she may see no way of cutting the Gordian knot of her difficulties, except by the elopement her lover may press upon her.

The London world about this time was much excited on the subject of Lady Trillamere's fête, which was announced, and which rumour said was to be of unwonted magnificence. It was well known in her own set that the sporting Countess had declared that if Camaralzaman won the Derby, she would show Her Grace of Pumicestone how the thing really ought to be done. Camaralzaman, beneficent animal, had won the Derby, and Letitia, Countess of Trillamere, had won

more money than perhaps a lady ever had won before over a race.

'Clanronald House is all very well, you know,' said her ladyship; 'but your primeval families will get a little behind the age. They are always so absorbed in contemplation of the family tree, and hampered with the traditions of what was the proper thing to do in the times of the mastodon. I'm a *roturière*, you know; my coronet is of yesterday. We got it by law, and have padded it a good deal through the medium of matrimony with cotton. Her Grace of Pumicestone says, let there be a ball, and there is a ball. I am going to say I will have a fête, and it shall be the pleasantest, most gorgeous, and enjoyable entertainment that London has seen these ten years. And to arrive at that consummation, I intend to lay violent hands on all my acquaintance that are gifted with brains and taste, and form them into a committee, of which I am to be president. If

the result of our labours is not more showy and satisfactory than the committees in the Commons, I shall cry with vexation.'

Lady Trillamere had been as good as her word; and, for the last month, she and some twelve or fourteen of her most intimate associates had been actively engaged in organising and preparing this entertainment. A large villa, with extensive grounds, on the banks of the Thames, had been engaged expressly. Men cunning in the erection of marquees, carpenters, professors of pyrotechny, and many other artificers, had been for the last three weeks actively engaged in preparing veritable gardens of Elysium, in which the sybariticism of London was to be entranced, pleased, and, if possible, astonished.

'Yes,' said her ladyship, as she returned, the day before the fête, after an inspection of what she denominated the field of battle. 'I think it will do. Fine weather I can't

order. Let the gods but be propitious, and I do think I shall cut out Her Grace of Pumicestone to-morrow.'

'Not a doubt of it,' replied Pauline St. Leger, 'even if the elements are against you. We have been too cunning of fence to trust entirely to the weather; of course a wet night would detract from our success; the fireworks and all the other open-air arrangements would have to be abandoned; but I think your guests will have no cause to complain of the amusement provided for them under cover.'

But the weather proved all that could be desired. The big July moon shone out over the gardens of Cliffenden Villa with a soft mellow light truly delicious, sending its glimmering rays across the river, which glittered like silver in loving response; on its banks had been erected a regular *café chantant*, chairs and tables both outside and in. A Thérèse was in attendance, who sang the

chansons of the Thérèse school with marvellous vivacity. A little distance off was a small theatre, in which an entertainment of the Richardson type was continually repeated, after the manner in which Mr. Toole and his coadjutors were so eminently successful, some few years ago, at the Dramatic College fête at Sydenham. Here and there were acrobats, with the legitimate street bit of carpet tumbling and twisting, for the amusement of the gay crowd. Coloured lamps and flowers were everywhere. There was a large marquee for dancing in the grounds. There were a couple of good rooms dedicated to the same purpose in the house. Refreshment tents were numberless. In the villa were two rooms fitted up with small tables, and set aside for supper. At the *café* by the water you called for the bill of fare, and ordered what you liked. This had been Lady Trillamere's special hobby, and, that it should be as like the veritable thing as

possible, her great anxiety. It proved a great success; the idea was original, and had been most carefully worked out. The Thérèse engaged for the evening had been selected after much research and consideration from the London music halls, and proved quite equal to the occasion. At one o'clock the theatre and the acrobats ceased their performances, and a grand display of fireworks commenced, from a decorated barge moored in the centre of the river.

All the London world were there: there was everyone you knew, and, as someone remarked afterwards, everyone you didn't know to boot. Lady Trillamere was rather democratic in her ideas, and insisted upon knowing everyone that was amusing, without much regard to their social status. Her callers' list would have given the Duchess of Pumicestone hysterics. At every turn you encountered fair women, rustling in soft silks and laces, whose jewels glittered in the moonlight. And no brighter face was there

among them all than that of the gay hostess herself.

'Victory!' she cried, with a ringing laugh, as the display of fireworks terminated, not a damp squib even amongst the whole of them. 'Now, Lord Collingham, I promised you a valse. Let us go and have it in the marquee. Pauline, my dear, there's Sir Alberic dying to ask you. Come along, all of you; I havn't had a dance to-night;' and, followed by a party of her more immediate intimates, Lady Trillamere led the way to the dancing tent.

Cecile Mallandaine stands very bored and *distraite* at the entrance to one of the villa ball-rooms. She has been inveigled into dancing the last quadrille with a young gentleman, whose conversational powers are of the weakest, but who still thinks it incumbent on himself to endeavour to entertain her. Suddenly she finds herself face to face with Alec Merriott, whose countenance also exhibits signs of preternatural boredom.

She hails him as the shipwrecked sailor does the passing barque. 'Captain Merriott!' she exclaimed, 'I havn't seen you this age, and I want to talk to you. Do come and take care of me for a little;' and, with a slight bow to her former partner, Cecile slipped her little hand through his arm.

'Only too glad,' replied Alec. 'I called on you last week, but didn't find you at home, unfortunately.'

'Yes, I know; but what makes you look so woe-begone to-night?'

'Social deception. I have only just arrived here, and havn't got over it yet. I dined out, and had to take down a woman I detest in a dress I couldn't bear.'

'Oh, I know who it was,' laughed Cecile; 'Mrs. Carruthers, in her yellow satin, for half a dozen pair of gloves. I know she's your *bête noire*.'

'Don't laugh, Lady Mallandaine; that woman will compel me to self-destruction some day. She writes unreadable novels;

and, ever since I was idiot enough to do the same, she claims me as an unappreciated fellow artist.'

'Ah! but you had a motive in turning author, Captain Merriott,' replied Cecile, softly; and, as she spoke, she looked up into his face inquisitively.

'Yes,' he replied, curtly; 'it didn't succeed though; and the motive no longer exists.'

'I am very sorry to hear it. I don't want to intrude upon your confidence, but I can't help thinking you are mistaken.'

'I fancy not, Lady Mallandaine. However, don't let me bore you about my failures in life. What will you do, dance, stroll, or shall we forage for food?'

'None of the three. We will sit down, and talk.'

'With pleasure, lady fair,' replied Alec. 'Now name a subject of discourse,' he continued, laughing, as they took possession of a couch near the window.

'Lia Remington,' replied Cecile, demurely.

'I've known you fairly eloquent on that theme in days not very far gone.'

'But the days are passed, and the subject is tabooed of late. I have bowed to woman and destiny.'

'And a man who doesn't confront both,' cried Cecile, vehemently, 'is either a fool or a coward. Harsh words, Captain Merriott, I know, and I apologise for them; but I mean them all the same. I'm going to say no more; but if you don't marry Lia, it will be your own fault.'

'You don't quite understand the situation,' replied Alec, grimly; 'but it's not worth while talking further about. How do, De Vitre?' he continued, as that gentleman approached and shook hands with Lady Mallandaine; and, after two or three minutes' desultory conversation, he rose and yielded his place to Ernest De Vitre.

The sofa upon which Lady Mallandaine had seated herself was placed in a semi-circular bay-window glazed to the ground.

The windows on this occasion had been taken out. Heavy curtains, removable at pleasure, alone separated them from the terrace, to which a descent of some two or three steps conducted. The curtains of the central sash had been drawn back, and the aperture served as a doorway to the terrace, about which were scattered some few chairs and lounges. They had not proved popular, and were apparently deserted. Stay; in one of the armchairs, close to the curtained side of the window, reclines a man, apparently asleep. A bronzed bearded man, attired in evening costume. His head is thrown back, his eyes are closed, and his right arm hangs listlessly over the chair-arm. A half-finished cigarette has escaped from the relaxed fingers; conclusive evidence as to why he had sought this solitary retreat. The terrace was on the side of the villa opposite to that on which the *café*, theatre, dancing marquee, and the river lay. This probably accounted for its unpopularity. Anyway, it had been

little visited. Gradually the sleeper becomes conscious of a low murmuring. His unconnected thoughts begin to take definite shape; this is constantly the precursor of our awaking. They present themselves to his brain as the low hum of an Indian hunting camp just before daybreak, when the native servants and shikarries glide about rather too chilled to chatter—to say nothing of a wholesome dread of prematurely awakening the sahibs. Once more his imagination has carried him to the jungle. He is dreaming of shooting big game and pig-sticking. Gradually steals over his senses a feeling that, doubtless, many of my readers have often experienced, namely, that his servants have neglected to call him. He becomes uneasy, and, in another minute or two, Wyndham Gwynne is awake, and conscious of a man's voice dictatorially replying to the low earnest pleadings of a woman's.

'I dare not; indeed I dare not. Hervey is jealous, and suspicious of my intimacy

with you now. I told you so before. Surely I can send them to you.'

'No; there is much more risk in that, under the circumstances. Bring them yourself. Besides, so little as I see of you now, it is hard to grudge me a stroll of half an hour. Won't you think of me a little, Cecile?'

'You have no right to call me that,' she replied, quickly. 'I owe you a vast debt of gratitude, Mr. De Vitre. Don't let the burden rest too heavy on my shoulders.'

'Ten thousand pardons; the name escaped me unconsciously. But meet me to-morrow you must. There are one or two things I can't tell you about till I have made enquiries.'

'Is there no other way?' asked Cecile, pleadingly.

'None. Say by the Marble Arch, at half-past three; the Park is deserted then.'

'Be it so,' she said, in a low voice. 'Now

take me back into the ball-room,' and the pair rose.

Gwynne sat for some seconds, rather bewildered by this conversation, of which he had been an unwitting auditor. Then, tranquilly lighting a fresh cigarette, he commenced to think it all out—of course he had recognised the voices. What was it Cecile was to bring? What constituted this hold that De Vitre apparently had over her? That she was very unwilling to meet him was obvious. The quickness with which she had rebuked him for calling her by her Christian name went far to exonerate her from being much compromised, as far as her own feelings were actually concerned. If he was to redeem that death-bed vow, and watch over Cecile as a sister, it seemed clear to him that the time was come. But how? He continued to smoke and muse for near a quarter of an hour; then, throwing away the end of a cigarette, Wyndham rose.

'I think I have it,' he muttered, as he

made his way rapidly to the cloak-room, to recover his overcoat and hat. 'At all events, I have settled how to play my game, and that's something.'

Five minutes later, and Wyndham Gwynne was whirling back to town as fast as a free-going Hansom could carry him. On arriving at his lodgings he scribbled a note, and then betook himself to bed.

CHAPTER IX.

'AT THE MARBLE ARCH.'

Madame Luce is an early riser, as it behoveth most of the business people in this world to be. She trips into her work-room for a few minutes, this pleasant July morning; it is the day succeeding Lady Trillamere's fête; she exchanges a few confidential remarks with her fore-woman, and then, just glancing into the shop, in which the girls are still busy dressing the windows, betakes herself to her own cheerful sitting-room for breakfast.

Fresh, bright, and trim as thrushes in May-time, looks Madame Luce as she contemplates her letters, of which a little pile lies heaped upon the table. Business letters all of them as a rule, for Madame Luce has few other correspondents.

Very pretty she looks in her delicate muslin dress, with the sunlight glinting through her fair hair as she stands by the table, and begins to investigate her correspondence. You would barely credit the trim girlish-looking woman with the eight-and-twenty summers that have passed over her head as she stands there, her bright eyes glancing rapidly over her letters.

'My guardian coming to breakfast,' she exclaims gleefully, as she runs over the hasty note Wyndham had penned over night, and sent off by messenger that morning. 'What can that mean? No trouble to him, I hope. Any way I shall be glad to see him,' and then she rang the bell, and proceeded to give divers directions regarding the reception of the unexpected guest, principally with reference to the banquet she deemed fit to spread for him. Was not the fatted calf to be killed when he, to whom she owed everything in the world, had announced his intention of visiting her?

What to call Wyndham on his return from the East had been a sore tribulation to Luce. Major Gwynne sounded so dreadfully formal, and although he always called her by her Christian name, she could never quite muster up courage enough to address him in like manner. Guardian seemed to her to be a species of compromise, and was now accepted tacitly between them.

'Welcome, guardian mine,' cried Luce, holding out both her hands to him as, about ten o'clock, Wyndham entered the sunshiny sitting-room. 'How good of you to volunteer to breakfast with poor me. I have bid Lisette, my old Frenchwoman, ransack all Islington in your behalf; she tells me you shall have a good *déjeûner*, and Lisette is to be relied on.'

'Thanks. You shall feed me first, Luce, for I am sore hungered; then I have got business to talk with you.'

'Ah! I was afraid so. No grief to you, guardian, is it; or not beyond remedy, if it is?' she asked quickly.

'No! I wish to prevent what might be great grief to me, Luce, and with your assistance trust to succeed in doing so.'

The colour died out of her cheek; she recollected that former conversation she had had with him. She knew now that the hour was come in which she was to prove her gratitude; moreover, she had an inkling of the way in which her service was to be rendered. To say that she did not shrink from what she felt was to be her task would be untrue, but to say that she ever dreamed of flinching in her loyalty to Wyndham would be equally so.

'Luce, my dear,' said Gwynne, as he tossed off a glass of light claret, 'I can't conceive how I could have been so dull as never to think of invading you in this wise before. You wicked little woman, how dare you conceal from me the possession of such a treasure as Lisette?'

'Doesn't she cook nicely? Let me give you some dinner some Sunday, and you shall see what she can really do.'

'Ah, you shall. Don't flatter yourself that I shall forget the invitation. But now we really must talk business, as there is no time to be lost.'

With somewhat pale cheeks, but set resolute mouth, Luce listened to all Wyndham's instructions. Now and again, as what he required developed itself more fully to her, she asked keen pertinent questions. After attentively considering his answer to one of these, she bade him wait for five minutes, and, ringing the bell, told the maid-servant to send Miss Joyce to her in her bed-room at once. Wyndham waited and wondered. Luce's bed-room was only across the passage. He heard her speaking quickly and earnestly, then there was a rustling of silk, and then he heard Luce say, on the head of the stairs,—

'You understand fully about the trimming?'

'Yes, Madame,' was the reply.

'Good: then recollect, please, I must have

both dress and bonnet back in two hours, and if needs be, all other work must be put on one side till they are done.'

'We can manage it easily by two o'clock,' was the reply, and then Luce glided back again into the room.

'Now you must write a letter for me,' said Wyndham. 'I will tell you what to say.'

She made no reply, but quietly got out her writing materials and commenced to write from his dictation. Gwynne, however, seemed puzzled rather about his self-imposed task, and ere the letter was half-finished, Luce suddenly stopped.

'Leave this to me, guardian,' she exclaimed. 'I understand your scheme now. Let me write this in my own way: believe me, I shall do it better than you will. Isn't it a woman's work, and am I not the woman of all others whose task it should be?'

He nodded assent, she took a fresh sheet, and for a few minutes her pen traversed

the paper rapidly. 'Isn't that better?' she said at last.

'Yes, much,' replied Wyndham, as he ran his eye over it. 'Now fold it up quick, and direct it, there's a good woman, for I must be off to town again. You won't fail me,' he continued, as he took the note from her hands. 'I may count upon you thoroughly,' and as he spoke he looked earnestly and enquiringly into her face.

'I'll not fail you,' said Luce, with a slight quiver of the lips. 'Whatever it may cost, depend upon me.'

'Then, good-bye for the present,' said Wyndham, as he shook hands; 'to-morrow I shall see you again.'

Luce sat resting her head upon her hand for some moments after he had left her. 'No,' she murmured, 'he never thinks of me in all this. It never occurs to him that this may be the sacrifice of my freedom and happy life here; that I am surrendering myself to a man who cruelly betrayed me,

and whom I no longer love. Still he has a right to ask it of me. My very life belongs to him.' But she thought, as the tears rose in her eyes, 'I wish Wyndham, my dearest, you more thoroughly comprehended what it is that I am about to do at your bidding. I don't suppose it ever crossed your mind that I might learn to love the man who saved me from the dark waters that night. Ah, poor fool! as if loving once had not been enough for you.'

Sir Hervey Mallandaine is sitting in his own private sanctum, considerably puzzled. Just as he was thinking of going out, a note was put into his hands—a note in unmistakable female handwriting, which, to borrow nautical metaphor, has taken the Baronet all aback. He has read it through some half-dozen times, and still sits musing over its contents, and twisting it in his fingers.

'The world has taught you to be jealous of your wife, Sir Hervey,' so it ran; 'surely you should be aware of what scandal that

world is capable. Unless it has been very dilatory, it has ere this informed you that Lady Mallandaine has an appointment at the Marble Arch at half-past three. If you wish to satisfy yourself that the pleasant society in which you live speaks untruthfully at times from want of accurate information, I invite you to attend. You will not repent accepting my summons. You will discover what it is at length time you should know, and that knowledge will cause you no pain. It will only disabuse your mind on a subject you will be glad to be put straight about. A sincere well-wisher to you and yours,

'I remain, obediently,

'L. De V.'

What should he do? There was something very repugnant to Sir Hervey's feelings in the thought of playing the spy upon his wife, and more than once he came to the resolution of taking no notice of his anonymous correspondent. He scoffed at the idea of

being jealous. Men mostly do. And yet in his heart of hearts he knew that he was bitterly so. One thing weighed much with him on the side of going. His correspondent declared positively that whatsoever discovery he might make would cause him no pain: in short, pretty clearly indicated that he would find his jealousy unfounded. There could be no disloyalty to his wife he argued, jesuitically, in conclusively proving that he had no cause to be jealous. Not that he was so, still no harm could accrue from his being at the Marble Arch at the hour indicated.

A few minutes after three saw Sir Hervey approaching Hyde Park Corner. A Hansom cab whirled by him, and suddenly pulled up with a jerk some thirty yards in front. A lady stepped quickly out, handed the driver his fare, and then, dropping her veil, turned into the Park. A shiver ran through the Baronet's frame, for he recognised his wife. All feeling of delicacy with

regard to following her was gone now. He must know all. A feverish anxiety for the *dénouement* took possession of him. You must bear in mind that this man, though at present estranged from her, still deeply and passionately loved this young wife of his, and none the less that his love was not of the demonstrative order. Gushing affection is for the most part shallow. Your bubbling springs are by no means the deepest.

He follows her stealthily. She just glances at the clock over the lodge, and apparently satisfied that she has plenty of time to spare, strolls leisurely on in the direction of Oxford Street. He takes the opposite side of the carriage-road, but keeps her carefully in view. There is no difficulty about that, for the Park just now is thinly peopled, and she walks slowly. In his feverish impatience how he wishes that she would quicken her pace. But fully conscious that she is in excellent time

for her appointment, Lady Mallandaine shows no disposition to do that, while Sir Hervey feels that he never till now had realised how slow a woman can walk when it pleases her. Fifty times or more he curses the anonymous letter, and wishes he had never answered its challenge; but the fell fascination of wishing to know all is upon him, and he never dreams of abandoning his intention.

But at last the vicinity of the Marble Arch is reached. Leisurely as she still walks, he can note that his wife begins to look a little nervously about her. A well-dressed man rises indolently from a bench, raises his hat, and joins her, and as he does so, Sir Hervey recognises De Vitre.

This then is the antidote to jealousy that has been prescribed for him.

The pair walk quietly away together, turning down the path that runs parallel to the Bayswater Road. De Vitre is apparently talking earnestly, while she listens in silence

chiefly to what he is saying. Sir Hervey's first impulse is to go through the arch and throw himself into the nearest cab, but suddenly he feels irresistibly compelled to see the end of the interview. He follows them. Under one of the trees they stop, their talk seems to grow more absorbing. All at once his wife throws back her veil, and he can plainly see De Vitre start almost as if he had been shot. Mastering himself with a great effort, Sir Hervey rapidly advances, and as he breaks in upon the *tête-à-tête*, the lady tenders a paper to De Vitre, and, in clear ringing tones, exclaims—'Yes, Ernest, it is your lawful wife that greets you ; albeit, it may cause you both astonishment and dismay.'

The crunch of his heel upon the gravel caused them both to turn, and to Sir Hervey's utter bewilderment he saw that the lady whose steps he had been dodging, although somewhat like, was assuredly not Cecile Mallandaine. Turning somewhat red

in the face after the manner of the Englishman in social difficulties, he made a confused bow to De Vitre, and passed on.

As for the latter, he hardly saw Sir Hervey; he stood like one stunned. Mechanically he took the paper she tendered him; it was a copy of the Lasterton registry duly attested. He was brought suddenly face to face with the one woman he had really loved in the whole of his selfish life; of whom Cecile, with all her charms, was to him but the copy.

'Luce,' he muttered at last.

'Yes, Luce De Vitre,' she replied proudly.

'I sought you long,' he continued, in a low voice, not noticing her last remark, not even glancing at the paper he held in his hand. 'Why did you leave me?'

His evident emotion softened her. It is true she no longer loved him, but this man had once been all in all to her. A woman can never forget that, let her be what she will. Until she had raised her veil she had

answered him but in monosyllables, and the somewhat ardent speeches he had made to her in her assumed character had done much to steel Luce in the *rôle* she had to play. But she recognised now that she had power over this man still. She had not been woman, if her answer had not been in softened tones.

'Because I deemed it disgrace to live with you,' she said at last. 'Because I found I had loved, trusted, and been betrayed.'

'I loved you very dearly, Luce,' he replied, quietly. 'Never a woman of them all so well before or since.'

'Love,' she said bitterly, 'and you could beguile the girl you pretended to love with what you deemed a mock marriage to her ruin!'

'Even so,' he murmured slowly. 'Let us sit down,' and he motioned to a bench that stood near.

'And do you understand now that you were more deceived than I, and that you really did marry me?'

'I might have been a happier man if I had, Luce,' and an incredulous smile wreathed his lips as he spoke.

She saw it, and it angered her. 'Read what is in your hand,' she cried. 'You will understand what I mean then.'

He did as she desired. His old *sang-froid* was coming back to him now. 'Luce,' he said quietly, 'this is simply not worth the paper it is written on.'

'There you are wrong. My friends have made every enquiry for me down at Lasterton, and I am assured that my marriage is perfectly good. Stop!' she said, 'don't interrupt me. Hear me out. I wish to make no claim upon you. I am earning my own living. You've a right to know how if you wish it, and it's a subject I have no cause to be ashamed of. I don't even seek to assume your name. Acknowledge me your wife for the satisfaction of my own people, and I'll never trouble you more. Refuse me that, and to justify myself in their eyes, the lawyers must decide between us.

Hold!' she cried vehemently, as he made a motion to interrupt her. 'For myself I would not stir a finger in this matter. With my own will I would never have seen you again. Ernest, God knows how I loved you once. You know how that love was killed.'

'And are you aware,' he said grimly, 'that if your story is true, and that you *are* my wife, I have a right to insist upon your once more living with me?'

'Ah! but you would not do that. You could not wish it. It would be misery to both of us. You know it. What I was to you once, I can never be again. Ernest,' she said pleadingly, 'don't be hard upon me. I don't ask to be openly recognised as your wife; I don't ask to receive the slightest assistance from you as such. Clear my fame, and that is all I demand of you.'

For a few moments he remained wrapped in thought; then, suddenly raising his head, he exclaimed, 'How the deuce came you to meet me here, pray?'

'Because I was told to,' she replied meekly.

'And you knew I expected to meet somebody else?'

'Yes. Lady Mallandaine.'

De Vitre uttered a low exclamation of surprise. It recurred now to his mind that Sir Hervey had just passed them. That he also might have made a mistake as to Luce's identity and taken her for Cecile in the same manner as he himself had done, until she raised her veil. Was this mere chance? Hardly; and, if it was not, who was this unknown adversary who was pulling the strings so scientifically against him? How came Luce to know so much of his life and movements as this? If Sir Hervey had been designedly brought there, for what reason had he been so brought on the scene? Why, again, had Lady Mallandaine failed in her appointment? How was it that Luce was attired so marvellously like her? All these things flashed like lightning through his brain. He drew

unmeaning lines on the gravel with his cane, as he pondered on them. He knew not what to think; he hardly comprehended what he felt. With the only woman he had ever really loved sitting by his side, declaring herself his wife and yet disclaiming every intention of asserting that position, all seemed chaos. The image of Cecile seemed to fade away into a dim perspective. He felt as a scientific whist-player might feel on being suddenly immersed in the game, not knowing what were trumps. Gradually, two ideas began to take possession of him: a fierce thirst to play the game out against this unknown adversary, and a feeling that it would be impossible for him to part with Luce. They were totally antagonistic lines of conduct, as anyone conversant with the state of affairs would have seen at once. Yet Wyndham Gwynne had as thoroughly overlooked this, as his adversary was about to do.

Luce meanwhile sat in anxious silence. She deemed her mission accomplished; and

was eager now to beat a retreat, but she could not go until he should once more speak, and give her an opening to break up their conference.

'I want to know,' he said at last, 'who told you all this?'

'All what?' she replied nervously.

'Psha,' he retorted impatiently. 'How did you learn that I expected to meet Lady Mallandaine here?'

'I can't tell you. I am pledged not to do so.'

'I supposed as much. Now, listen to me,' he continued in low, earnest tones; 'if I have loved Lady Mallandaine—and I have passionately—it was simply as a memory of you. Her face, every trick of her manner, reminded me of you. Wife or no wife, we'll not part again, Luce.'

She had foreseen this all along, and now her most cruel forebodings seemed about to fulfil themselves. A slight shudder ran through her frame as she listened to his pas-

sionate speech, but she braced herself for the occasion,

'Ernest de Vitre,' she replied slowly and distinctly, 'as your wife, you will have it in your power to compel me to live with you. If you deliberately choose to inflict such penance upon me, I must bear it as best I can. I shall be a true wife to you as far as in me lies, but don't deceive yourself, and think that you can ever rekindle the old love in me. That lies buried fathoms deep in oblivion's sea.'

'Do you mean,' he said fiercely, 'that you can never think of me again as you once did?'

'Even so,' she replied wearily. 'There is no more to be said. Take me to the Marble Arch, please, and put me into a cab.'

They walked back in silence, and De Vitre hailed a cab.

'Give me your address,' he said, as he opened the door. 'I have a right to know it.'

'Yes, I am afraid so, Ernest,' she continued, drawing a portmonnaie from her pocket. 'I could almost wish in my heart that I might not prove to be your wife. You would consign us both to life-long misery. There,' she said, handing him a card, 'that's my address and calling. Good-bye.'

CHAPTER X.

'WYNDHAM REDEEMS HIS VOW.'

It is open to question whether anybody present at Lady Trillamere's fête derived such thorough enjoyment from it as Pauline St. Leger. To the uninitiated this is difficult to explain. Still, you may understand, reader, the relief that comes when, after struggling for years to hold your own in this world, you suddenly feel overwhelmed and cease battling. Can you not picture a strong man swept away by a flood? He clutches some treacherous branches that overhang the waters; sore strain is there on his muscles to retain his hold; the bead drops stand on his brow from the exertion. Suddenly, he becomes conscious that the bush to which he clings is slowly, but surely, parting at the

roots. The strain is no wit relaxed on the muscles, whilst his eyes glare fiercely as root after root gives way. Can you not fancy a feeling of peace stealing over him in those few seconds when, the last fibre parted, he floats helpless on the current, ere the first agony of drowning commences? Such were Mrs. St. Leger's feelings; it was all over she knew, and her very days in London were numbered. Never had she been gayer than she was that night. She danced,—and Pauline's valsing was as near the 'poetry of motion' as may be,—as she had never danced of late. Favoured indeed were accounted those of her admirers to whom she vouchsafed the occasional fast dance in which she indulged when the floor and the music met with her special approbation. But to-night she danced valse after valse, galop after galop, as no hardened performer in her second season would have ventured to do. She was draining the chalice to the dregs. Gay, verily, was a *petit souper*, at which she,

Lady Trillamere, and some halfscore others, gathered, in a quiet little room at the villa about daybreak, and the life and soul of the party was Mrs. St. Leger.

'Good night, Pauline,' said her hostess, as their carriages drew up. 'Thanks for all your exertions in my behalf. I don't know when, my dear, I have seen you in such spirits, or looking so adorably handsome.'

Most thoroughly did Sir Alberic Hungerford endorse her ladyship's verdict, as he handed Mrs. St. Leger to her brougham. 'You might be good-natured,' he said, looking wistfully into her face, 'and give me a lift back to town.'

'Sir Alberic,' she replied, with a low rippling laugh, 'don't you know that it is a very wicked world, and that I am a very wicked woman, and always become painfully conscious of my sins about four in the morning?'

'You can confess them to me all the way to town; and confession, you know, is always the prelude to repentance.'

'Put with great casuistry,' retorted Pauline. 'I must take heed what I say to you in future. But besides being wicked, it is a very scandalous world, you know, and much given to talk about my proceedings. I am very sensitive about its remarks,' she continued, with a little grimace and flash of her dark eyes. 'Give me a cigarette.'

'Charity, Mrs. St. Leger, is the first of virtues. I am left broughamless and desolate,' he replied, mendaciously, as he handed her his cigarette-case. 'You don't mean to condemn me to walk to town in dress boots, do you?'

'Ah! well; if it is so melancholy a case as that comes to, I must defy the world once more. Jump in.'

She felt she owed him a good deal, and was disposed to give him a last sip of the Circean cup she had proffered to his lips. She had valsed with him half the night, and Lady Trillamere's fête long remained a red-letter day in Sir Alberic's calendar.

Mrs. St. Leger rose about twelve the next day in the very best possible health and spirits. She felt as if she had performed, and was still about to perform, an infinity of virtuous actions. And yet this volatile lady was only contemplating absconding from her creditors. Principles, I should opine, had troubled Pauline little for many years; but the struggle to procure the means with which to hold her position had been sore trial and tribulation. Many a time she had bitterly despised herself for the use she had made in this way of her numberless admirers. Bad woman as she was, there was yet a germ of generosity in her heart, and she often hated herself for the line of conduct that necessity compelled her to adopt. Now this was al over, she felt like a woman who had shaken off her fetters.

A cup of tea and a little dry toast, and then she drove gaily off to lunch with Lady Mallandaine. She found Cecile in her drawing-room; but with a cloud upon her

face, and a general air of despondency pervading her appearance.

'What on earth is the matter with you?' exclaimed Pauline, as they shook hands. 'Why you look like a ghost or a woman laden with crime this bright morning. You didn't stop late, either, last night; at least, if you did, I never saw you, and it was broad daylight when I drove home.'

'No, it isn't that, Pauline,' rejoined Lady Mallandaine, only too glad to find some one to whom she could unburthen herself. 'I am worried, fretted to death, and about something I promised to do last night. I don't see how I could have helped myself, either, much as I disliked it at the time.'

'Committed herself, somehow, with Ernest, and has twinges of conscience this morning,' thought Mrs. St. Leger. 'Well, my dear, my worldly knowledge is at your disposal; but I must know the case before I advise.'

'That is just what I want you to do.

Ernest de Vitre insists upon my meeting him to-day, and I don't want to do so. Sir Hervey is disagreeable about our intimacy now, and I don't wish to give him any further handle on the subject,' replied Cecile, a little nervously.

'Then don't meet him,' replied Pauline, sententiously.

'But I can't help myself,' said Cecile, rather tearfully. 'You know the scrape I got into at Ascot? Well, I took your advice, and asked Mr. De Vitre to raise me the money on my jewels. He wouldn't hear of it, and insisted on being my banker for the time. Why, ah! why couldn't he take them then?' and Cecile buried her face in her hands dismally.

'Ah!' mused Pauline; 'and you, after all, are only an idea to him—a mere likeness of some other woman. These men, these men; can we ever be too hard upon them?'

'Why don't you answer me?' cried Cecile, raising her head.

'Because I don't quite understand the case, yet,' replied Mrs. St. Leger. 'Why must you meet him to-day?'

'Because he says now that he wants the jewels, and that I must bring them to him myself. He tells me he is in difficulties, that he does not like to call here, and that the safest way to hand them over to him is to bring them to him myself.'

'Forcing trumps,' mutters Mrs. St. Leger, quietly. 'Answer me one question, Cecile, and I will tell you what to do.'

'What is it?' said Lady Mallandaine.

'Do you love Ernest de Vitre? Remember, you have given him and the world fair cause to think so;' and Mrs. St. Leger threw herself back in her chair judicially.

Cecile's face flushed. 'No,' she replied steadily, at last. 'I owe him much, and would be a loyal and true friend to him ever, if I might. But I don't care for him otherwise. I know I have been foolish, and

have flirted with him more than I should have done; but he is nothing to me.'

'Simplifies the thing immensely, my dear,' replied Pauline, quickly. 'You have nothing to do but to meet him, give him the jewels, and have done with it.'

'I can't, I can't,' interrupted Cecile.

'But you must, you little simpleton. It is a mere matter of business. You can wind up your flirtation, and give him his *congé* at the same time. I know Ernest well, and he will accept the situation gracefully when he finds it inevitable.'

That a woman, where her feelings were not involved, could feel apprehensive about an interview with any man in Christendom, was beyond Mrs. St. Leger's comprehension.

Further discussion between them was cut short by the almost simultaneous announcement of Major Gwynne and luncheon. At the conclusion of that meal, Pauline took her departure. She had a great dislike to Wyndham, founded upon tolerably legiti-

mate grounds. In the first place, she had found all her artillery powerless in his case: that in itself was sufficient to pique a woman who rarely met a man that did not to some extent succumb to her fascinations. Secondly, she was conscious that Wyndham's indolent brown eyes read her like print. Intuitively, she felt this, as such women will. She who had blinded and fascinated men for the best part of her lifetime, knew that she could exercise no power over this one man—knew that he thoroughly understood her. Pauline had never known, since her first mad passion for De Vitre, what it was to stand in awe of a man; yet she could but admit that she was never quite at her ease with Wyndham, and imperceptibly she had gradually imbued Cecile with somewhat similar feelings. There was a slight dash of awe mingled with the love Lady Mallandaine bore her cousin, and in pure brotherly fashion she was very fond of him.

'I never saw you all last night, Wyndham,'

exclaimed Cecile, when they had regained the drawing-room. 'Of course you were there. What on earth did you do with yourself?'

'Yes, I was there, and I fell asleep there. I went out on the terrace to smoke a cigarette, and became the unconscious confidant of a very promising flirtation,' replied Wyndham, lazily.

'What fun! Was it anybody you knew?' cried Cecile, laughing.

'Yes; I knew them both, but I can't say I saw much fun in it. It does not amuse me to see a woman trifling with her life's happiness. I know I'm very stupid; but I've lived too much abroad to have arrived at the cynicism which the London world deem such a proof of high cultivation.'

There was something in his tones that made Lady Mallandaine's heart jump. The laugh died away upon her lips, and a feverish anxiety lit her eyes as she replied, nervously,

'Ah, I forgot you men from distant colo-

nies come home with rather high strained notions at times about woman's proceedings in such cases; and yet, methinks, I have heard that Indian society is not peculiarly distinguished for the strictness of its morals.'

'We'll not discuss that,' rejoined Wyndham. 'I want to talk a little seriously with you, Cecile. Do you remember your mother's death-bed?'

She nodded assent. Her face was pale and still enough now.

'You must recollect,' he went on, not looking at her, but staring dreamily into the empty grate, 'that I promised then to be, as far as was in my power, a brother to you, should ever occasion require it. The time seems to me to have come, and to-day I have asserted my prerogative.' He raised his eyes to her face as he spoke, but she had dropped her head upon her hand, and toyed nervously with her handkerchief.

'Do you want to know now what conversation I chanced to overhear last night?

It was that between you and Ernest de Vitre.'

'And how dare you play the spy upon me in that fashion?' she cried, starting passionately to her feet. 'It was mean, cowardly, unmanly. What do you mean to do next?' she asked, with flushed face and gleaming eyes.

'Prevent your meeting him,' returned Wyndham, curtly.

'You can't, and sha'n't. I have reasons for meeting him that you cannot comprehend. You do me gross injustice, but I am not surprised at that from a man who could stoop to listen to a private conversation. I can conceive you capable of anything now.'

There was a dark flush on Wyndham's face, and the tones of his voice deepened as he replied, sternly: 'I overheard your conversation by the merest of accidents; but I recommend you not to meet him all the same.'

'I presume in your anxiety about me,

you have thought it necessary to communicate with Sir Hervey on the subject,' said Cecile, bitterly.

'Not exactly; but I think you will probably find him, Ernest de Vitre, and a lady of whom you have no cognizance, under the Marble Arch, at half-past three, if you persist in refusing to abide by my advice.'

'A lady!' exclaimed Cecile, with astonishment, and she stared in open and undisguised bewilderment at her cousin. 'A lady, who is she?'

'Mrs. De Vitre, and the only woman I honestly believe Ernest ever cared about.'

'Mrs. De Vitre,' murmured Cecile, as she threw herself into a chair, and buried her face in her hands. 'There's no such person.'

'Excuse me, she separated from him; but he's been married the last eight years.'

Lady Mallandaine said never a word, but, with her face still hidden, became absorbed in thought. It was a blow to her vanity to find that this man whom she deemed so de-

voted to herself had a wife living—a wife whom, according to Wyndham's testimony, he still held first among women. But, after all, meet him or not, she was still no more absolved from her complications than before. What was she to do? How she wished Wyndham would go, that she might think it all out. No, she must know more. Should she confess all to him?

The thread of her reflections was severed by the entrance of a footman, who announced that the carriage was at the door.

'Better say, you don't want it till five,' said Wyndham, gravely. 'I've not quite done my talk.'

'Yes, say I've changed my mind, and shall not go out till five;' and with a quiet 'very good, my lady,' the servant vanished.

'Wyndham,' said Cecile, as the door closed, 'you must forgive me what I said in my passion. I feel lost, I am entangled in a mystery of which you alone seem to have the key. Not one of us ever dreamed

Ernest De Vitre was married. You know what passed between us last night. You alone can tell me how Sir Hervey and Mrs. De Vitre have been brought to meet him to-day, and why.'

'They are there through my instrumentality. The why, because, pardon me, Cecile, you were compromising yourself in the eyes of the world and your husband by a reckless flirtation with Ernest De Vitre. Sir Hervey will deem himself to some extent mistaken on that head when he sees your likeness. De Vitre, I verily believe, shock though it may be to your vanity, will relax his attentions to yourself on discovery of his lawful wife.'

'And is she so like me?' asked Cecile, eagerly, curiosity overwhelming, for the moment, all other feelings.

'Very. It was in great measure that which made you such an attraction to him in the first instance.'

'I'll not argue about that,' replied Cecile,

with a faint smile, 'though it's not complimentary of you to tell me so.'

Well, it is certainly not soothing to a woman's vanity to find that she has been adored simply because she happened to remind her admirer of a bygone love. And yet it is a very every-day occurrence, if people did but know it. Many a man marries a copy of his lost ideal. A prettier, better, and cleverer woman it may be, but that first love is surrounded with all the glamour of

'Ma jeunesse que je regrette.'

Ah, me! what very commonplace women our fancy decks in beauty and bathes in sunlight in those juvenile days of poetry and romance. I believe I should say *did*, for the present generation begin life about thirty, and are deserving of much sympathy on that account. Nothing is so truly to be pitied as precocity; nothing, perhaps, so difficult to tolerate with ordinary patience. Miss Crummles is the only infant pheno-

menon I ever encountered without a shiver; and it has been my lot to meet some very dread infants in my wanderings through life.

'Wyndham,' said Lady Mallandaine, after a silence of some minutes, 'you said you claimed your right to act as my brother. I have been thinking for the last five minutes, and I want to tell you all I can.'

'Good God!' he cried, 'you don't mean that I have interfered too late. Are you going to tell me, Cecile, that you are further compromised with this man than I dream of?'

'Don't, please don't,' she exclaimed, pleadingly. 'Oh Wyndham, I have never been myself, I think, since poor Bertie's death. If you are hard upon me now, I don't know what will become of me. I know I have been very wrong, wicked. I have estranged my husband from me and some of my dearest friends. I was so miserable then, and I thought Hervey blamed

me so about the loss of our boy, I sought only to forget,' and Cecile burst into a fit of hysterical sobbing.

Aware of her weakness on this point, Wyndham was about to ring the bell, but she motioned to him to stop.

'No,' she murmured, 'I shall be better directly. I know what you are thinking of, but though I still hold myself bitterly to blame about his death, poor darling, I don't deem myself so guilty as I once did.'

Wyndham waited patiently till she had in some measure recovered herself, and then seized upon the opportunity.

'Cecile,' he said, gravely, 'neither your husband nor your friends ever blamed you there. It was God's will, poor child, that he should be taken from you; and your thinking otherwise has been a mere hallucination from which, thank heaven, I believe you have at last, in great measure, freed yourself.'

'I don't know; he might have been

saved, I can't help thinking yet, if he had had more nursing,' said Cecile, almost in a whisper.

'No, I tell you ten thousand times, no,' retorted Wyndham, eagerly. 'Now you can bear to talk about it again, I tell you the Doctor said no earthly care could have saved him. Won't you believe me? Did I ever lie to you, Cecile?'

'No. But they all told me that at the time and—and I couldn't believe it.'

'Because, poor child,' said Wyndham, in a low tone, 'you were stunned with your great grief. They would have done better to have let you alone a little, before trying to combat that miserable idea. Their opposition only fixed it in your mind.'

'You are very good to me,' she said, gently.

'Now listen. I thought I knew all, but I see now that I was mistaken. I won't believe, Cecile, that you can have anything further than folly and imprudence to con

fess. Tell me everything. What looks so insurmountable to you, will probably be of small account if you leave me to deal with it.'

And then with tearful eyes and burning cheeks, Cecile faltered out the story of her Ascot scrape, and how she had allowed De Vitre to be her banker; how she had never dared to ask her husband for money enough to liquidate that debt; how in the fast set with whom she had lived of late she had never been able to make her allowance do, and in consequence had only got still more involved with her milliner, &c.

'Wyndham,' she said, as she finished her confession, 'I have told you all now. You won't throw me over, will you? I know I have been wicked and foolish, but if you don't tell me what to do, I have no one else to look to.'

'Your husband,' muttered Wyndham, grimly.

'I can't, indeed I daren't,' cried Cecile, burying her face in her hands.

'And I tell you, you must. Listen. This debt to De Vitre, I shall settle at once, and in such wise that all intimacy between you will be severed. You will meet in future as casual acquaintances; it will be your own fault if you are more. When you are reconciled to Sir Hervey——'

Lady Mallandaine shook her head.

'Ah, you doubt that. That also will rest with yourself, Cecile, in great measure, but when you are, make a clean breast of it to him. I am your banker, mind, till then; but if you follow my advice, it won't be for very long. And now I'm off. Don't make yourself miserable about what is past; but try resolutely to be what you are in reality, the good, honest, warm-hearted girl I knew before I went to India. Trust me to clear the clouds away; and I don't want to preach, Cecile, but the sooner you drop Mrs. St. Leger the better.'

'Pauline is not so bad as you deem her,' replied Lady Mallandaine, chivalrously.

'It is to be hoped not; but the world generally have not much opinion either of her morals or her principles.'

'Poor child,' he muttered, as he left the house, 'with her brain half warped and under the joint tuition of De Vitre and Mrs. St. Leger, it is not much to be wondered that she got into trouble. I am curious to know how my dramatic effect succeeded under the Marble Arch.

'Ah,' murmured Cecile, 'I was not altogether foolish when I loved him in those bygone days. He was a man worth loving, at all events.

CHAPTER XI.

'THE FEATHERS.'

THE police will tell you that the purlieus of Westminster are dangerous. In that labyrinth of squalid streets that constitute the Westminster slums there lurk, perhaps, as much crime, vice, and misery as could be found in Whitechapel, Bermondsey, Poplar, or the vicinity of the Docks. I am speaking of that part of Westminster that verges on the river, lying a little ~~below~~ above the Houses of Parliament, and almost facing the episcopal gardens at Lambeth, which display their floral beauties on the opposite side of the reach so named. That Westminster in the aggregate is decorous and respectable, I need scarcely assert. Do not our wisest and greatest lie buried in the grand old abbey?

Does not the collective wisdom of the nation meet annually within its precincts, and with much verbosity gravely divest us of the few shreds of prestige that yet remain to us? Ah, could we but recall some of those dead and gone statesmen, and relegate a few of our new lights to the abbey in their stead, it would be better for England, desecration of its sacred soil though it might be. Sunk in sloth and lapped in luxury, our whole system imbued with the greed for gold, the old Viking spirit of our ancestors well-nigh dead in us, we should present but a pitiable sight for our rulers of fifty years ago, could they but see us now. But, what matter! were we ever richer? Does not the march of luxury progress? Are not the rouge pot, false tresses, and all the other shams of this vitiated age in which we live, plentiful and in vogue? Though

> We've gold without iron, no steel to environ
> That wealth we so gather and carefully hoard,—

still I presume I should be met with a storm

of execration if I ventured to hint that our social system is far from as sound as it might be.

Amongst the associates of Mr. Jonathan Wild, as Fielding tells us, was one *nomine* Blueskin, 'who had two qualities of a great man, viz., undaunted courage and an absolute contempt of those ridiculous distinctions of *meum* and *tuum*, which would cause endless disputes, did not the law happily decide them by converting both into *suum*. The common form of exchanging property by trade seemed to him too tedious.' Mr. Flippington, *alias* the Count, was similarly constituted, and held very similar opinions. He, therefore, like any other great man, exercised the audacity and intelligence with which nature had gifted him in the acquisition of so much of other people's property as might minister to his necessities. As the Count was of a luxurious disposition, his necessities impelled him to much irregular taxation of the British public.

Mr. Remington, as we know, had been long marked out by this astute—shall we say communist? as a man whose wealth peculiarly called upon him to contribute towards the subsistence of Mr. Flippington and his companions. His mouth had positively watered when the utterly unsuspicious butler showed him the great silver tankards, side dishes, centre pieces, salt cellars, &c., that he held in charge. Can you imagine the farmer showing the fox round his poultry yard, and descanting upon the plumpness of his turkeys and goslings! Mr. Flippington lingered fondly over the spectacle, almost refusing to believe in the reality of so much magnificence, until the indignant butler pointed out the incontrovertible Hall-mark. He and that respectable servitor became sworn friends. Mdlle. Suzanne's 'young man' was voted a great addition to the upper room circle, and looked upon as an immense improvement on that grim Yorkshire admirer of hers—the cynical Butters. It was little

wonder then that when a footman, grown contumacious from high living and want of work, received his *congé*, Mr. Reynolds, the butler, should listen kindly to the application Mr. Flippington preferred on behalf of a friend of his own.

'Most respectable young man; brought up to better things, Mr. Reynolds, but no firmness, no fixity of purpose; could never rise, sir, to your position, not head for it. But oblige me, and try him; he will do under you, sir. If you can't make anything of him, I never interfere again in his behalf;' and Mr. Flippington thrust his hands into his pockets, and shook his head sternly. Mr. Reynolds was tickled at this deference to his superiority. Like the majority of his class, he was apart from his vocation a mingled compound of pomposity and stupidity. Characters of the highest order were produced easily by Mr. Flippington. The Countess was inimitable in this department, and had great talent in simulating other

people's caligraphy. Abel Somers was speedily installed in the place of the mutinous footman, with instructions from his chief to report weekly or oftener should he deem that affairs looked favourable for their enterprise.

'What I have told him, Mr. Reynolds, is this,' said the Count, one evening as he sat discussing a bottle of claret, with the butler, in his private sanctum. 'Abel,' I said, 'you've a fair start now in the profession you've elected for yourself. You're going to serve in a swell house and under one of the very tip toppers of the business in London. If he says you're no use, you give it up and take to banners at the theatre, that's my tip and advice to you. He's not very sharp, Mr. Reynolds, and to a man who sees everything at a glance like yourself, that'll be a bit aggravating, but you'll oblige me much if you'll give him a fair trial.'

'Mr. Flippington,' replied the butler pompously, 'there's my 'and on it; I never

does things by 'alves. Hignorance we expects amongst the juniors, but when they're willing, I've 'opes of em always. They talk a good deal about heducation now a days, and they legislates everlasting about it one way and another. But why aint there a college for servants? that's what I want to know. They ought to come for places with certificates as to their boot cleaning, plate cleaning, knowledge of lamps, and the rudiments of salad mixing. We're a power in the land, we are, and, only the trades-union business is beneath us, we could make the hupper classes tremble to-morrow.'

'I've no doubt you're right,' replied the Count, as he rose to depart; 'but I must be off, it's getting late, and I'm an early bird.'

'Right,' said Reynolds oracularly, 'I knows I am. Them gents at St. Stephen's are beginning at the wrong end; they are edicating down, education should come from the people to the higher classes. You should learn to black boots before you goes in for

parlez-vooing and them dead languages. Why, if our profession did a simultaneous strike in the season, this end of the town would have to lie in bed till we came to terms. *They'd have no clean boots to put on.*'

In the purlieus of Westminster before alluded to are dens, vile and manifold, into which should the unwary stranger be enveigled, he may deem himself fortunate if he escape with no more harm than the loss of his personalities. Garotting, hocussing, and other operations detrimental to health, are much in vogue among the denizens of those parts. The houses have, some of them, queer cellars and trap-doors. The river runs handy, and who is to say how a man came by his death whose disfigured corpse is washed ashore at Greenwich or Deptford? The existence of a human atom would not be suffered by the philosophers of those parts to stand between them and the acquirement of thirty shillings. Why should it? when they can relegate such atom from this vale of tears to a brighter

sphere, and benefit themselves by so doing, who can gainsay them? It is true they have failed as yet to make the Courts of Justice converts to these liberal views, but persecution has been the lot of most advanced philosophers.

In the centre of this dubious district stood a flash-looking public house, called 'The Feathers.' It possessed a gaudy spacious bar, at which a goodly muster of the squalid neighbourhood might be generally found stifling their hunger, drowning their misery, or stimulating their vicious inclinations with alcohol. At one end a passage was screened off the interior of the bar, communicating by a snap-lock wicket with the outer side of the counter. This was used only by the initiated, who were better clad, and of an apparently superior class to the ragged, draggled crowd they passed through. A brief enquiry from the young lady who was officiating with the spirits, or of the bullet-headed landlord, and they either departed or slipped quietly

through the above-mentioned wicket, and disappeared from the public view.

The house was well known to the police. Mr. William Sickles, the proprietor, had been in trouble on more than one occasion. Scorning the cup which cheers but inebriates not, he was given to devote himself to that which does inebriate, but which in his case unfortunately did not cheer. Mr. Sickles waxed morose when in liquor. He would tell you that he belonged to 'the Fancy,' which, translated, means that he was a third-rate prize fighter, with an unmistakeably soft drop in him. When drunk, his predominate idea was that he was being put upon, and that somebody ought to be thrashed in consequence. His own wife was naturally the easiest and handiest victim to sacrifice to this superstition, and a miscalculation as to the amount of physical violence that a woman can endure had twice contributed to his appearance at the Westminster police court. Luckily for him, Mrs. Sickles rejoiced in a

sound constitution, and although the second time in very serious danger, she succeeded in recovering from the injuries inflicted by her brutal husband. Heavy recognizances to keep the peace, and a dim perception that but for his active wife the business would speedily go to pieces, had of late ensured Mrs. Sickles comparative immunity from ill-treatment.

That was, however, by no means all the police had to allege against the landlord of 'The Feathers.' The dry skittle alley in the rear of the house had been the scene of some notable sharping in its time; and although Mr. Sickles had not been legally proved to be mixed up in such transactions, the authorities deemed the purity of his character a little tainted thereby. Moreover, the house was suspected of being addicted to 'parlour field sports,' and had the credit of doing something illicit, in the ratting, cockfighting, and dog-fighting way at times; and yet with all this, the police had no idea that in those

upper rooms at the Feathers some of the most scientific 'cracksmen' in London were wont to congregate—that over the gaudy bar some of those clever burglaries which had so perplexed them to elucidate had been mapped out.

Now 'The Feathers' was the Count's house of business. Like gentlemen engaged in other commercial pursuits, although he lived at Brompton, he had his offices elsewhere. He found Westminster better adapted to his purpose than the City, and rented a room of Mr. Sickles, in which he kept, carefully locked up, all the various articles incidental to his profession: such as wigs, pigments, and other accessories to disguise—jemmies, centrebits, chisels, skeleton-keys, fine saws, a jack-in-the-box dark lantern, &c. Part of his system was never to engage in any expedition without carefully making up beforehand, and it was this precaution, and his dexterity in disguising his actual identity, that had enabled him to so long baffle the police.

Seated round a table garnished with various bottles and glasses, in the parlour over the bar are four men and a woman. The woman sits rather apart, and appears to listen carelessly to the conversation, but for all that, not a syllable escapes her quick ears, not a gesture is unperceived by her sleepy-looking eyes. The Count has just finished speaking earnestly and forcibly to his companions, and they appear to be still pondering over what he has said. That wiry little man to his left is Bill Casey, a cracksman of great renown, and one of the Count's most trusted colleagues. Next to him, puffing lazily at his cigar, is a tall, slim, fair-haired man, of about five-and-twenty, known to the fraternity as 'the Wheedler.' Although he often dips into the burglary department, 'the Wheedler' is a universal genius. He scorns to be fettered by the marriage laws of his country, and is always ready to link himself to any young woman with money, at the shortest possible notice, in any way she may prefer. He is

supposed to have as may wives as a Mormon, and boasts that he has entered the marriage state through every conceivable channel. He preys upon credulous shopkeepers like a vulture, and rejoices in at least a dozen fashionable *alias's*. It will be a special boon to society when he shall at last meet his deserts. The Countess, for of course the listless lady is she, always mistrusts this man. Steeped in crime though she is, and regarding it by this time as almost a legitimate means of livelihood, she has enough womanly feeling left in her to induce contempt for a man who systematically plunders women of their all, under the cowardly mockery of marriage. A bold robber, like her pseudo-husband or Casey, she respects, but 'the Wheedler' she holds in little esteem.

'It sounds well, it promishes well, boys,' at last exclaimed the fourth of the conclave, a swart, grizzled, elderly man, with an unmistakable Jewish cast of countenance. 'I shouldn't mind advancshing a little on dis

here spec, if you wansht it, you know. S' help me.'

The speaker was one of the most notorious fences in London.

'That's a good sign,' returned the Count, with a dry laugh. 'You're not free with the flimsys, Manasseh, as a rule.'

'S' help me, I nevershrefused to find quids for you, Count, when you tells me you'sh a job in hand. The shooner dis little affair comes off the better, it shtrikes me.'

'You hold your tongue, Manasseh,' struck in the woman. 'You're not going to risk your precious carcass in the business. Don't be in a hurry, Jim—you've waited a good bit; be patient still, and don't move in it until Abel gives you the office. Aint I right, Casey?'

'I'm with you, Polly,' rejoined that worthy. 'The Count there knows I'm game whenever he gives the word; but let "the Simple un" work it out, that's what I says. Abel aint a fool, and works out a plant as well as

e'er a one of us. As for old Methuselah,' he continued, jerking his head contemptuously towards the Jew, 'let him keep his melting pots on the boil till we're ready for him.'

A shrill whistle and a peculiar tap on the door here broke in upon the conference.

'That's Abel for a five-couter screen,' exclaimed the Count excitedly. 'Jump up, Polly, my woman, and let him in. When we've heard him patter, we shall tumble to the whole plant.'

The Countess unlocked the door and admitted 'the Simple un,' as he was generally designated amongst the fraternity, from the skill with which he could represent the country bumpkin or innocent young man. Abel greeted the assembled company warmly, and then said,

'Here, give us something to vash my mouth out vith; quick, for I'm in a devil of a hurry. Ah, that'll do, Vheedler, my boy. Sluice it vith a little water, and send it across. Now, Count, I've only got short

leave to wisit a sister who is seriously ill, and must be off again in about twenty minutes. I'd best say vot I've got to say at vonce, and then you can tell me how the little game is to be played. Old Reynolds, the plate, and 'the buttons' vent down to Twickenham yesterday; to-day ve dines out; and to-morrow the ladies goes to Brighton vith flunky number vun and the ladies'-maids in attendance. I'm to go down to the willa to-morrow, but aint quite certain vot the old gent means a doing. Stays in town, I thinks, for another day or two.'

'Couldn't be better,' said the Count, with glittering eyes. 'The sooner the better now, the fruit's ripe for plucking, d—mme. I say to-morrow night, Casey. What do you say?'

'The Simple un's worked it out like an oracle. It won't mend by keeping; the sooner it's done the sooner we sacks the mopusses. I vote for to-morrow night.'

'Good. Recollect, Manasseh, you may keep your fire going to-morrow night. We'll fill up the melting pots before sunrise, eh, lads?'

'Goot, goot,' chuckled the Jew, 'you wilsh find old Manasseh alls ready for youssh.'

'Well then, Abel, we'll go by that rough plan I made out after surveying the crib last month when I went down as an upholsterer's man to see about new curtains. You're quite certain that ground-floor room which I pitched upon for coming in at is Miss Remington's?'

'Yes,' returned Abel, curtly.

'Well, then, you've nothing to do but see the window and shutter fastenings are undone. The room will be empty, of course, and the rest is easy.'

'Leastvays, it didn't ought to be difficult for practised hands like yourself, Count, Casey, and "the Vheedler." You'll may be have to put a stocking into old Reynolds's mouth and tie him down, cos he sleeps

amongst the swag, he does. But I'm a remarkably sound sleeper myself,' observed 'the Simple un,' with a leer: 'and there'll only be a couple of vomen and a buttons in the house besides. I'll lock up the vomen; and if buttons is troublesome, drop him in the vaterbut and put the lid on. Only, do mind you don't disturb me. I can't abear my natural rest being broken.'

A broad grin suffused the party at 'the Simple un's' joke.

'All in for 1 A.M. then to-morrow,' said the Count, laughing. 'We'll meet at "The Blue Boar" there about ten; you all know it, and I'll see the light cart is there. We'd better do the market-gardener dodge as usual; and you may depend on me to see the trap's properly garnished.

'Mein Got, what a man he ish,' chuckled the Jew.

'Aint he, old Solomon?' said Abel. 'But I must hook it. Good-bye, Countess. Casey, Vheedler, my pals, I looks towards

you,' and gulping down the remainder of his brandy-and-water, 'the Simple un' took his departure.

The others remained for some little time settling minor details connected with the projected robbery, in which discussion the Countess took an animated part, and then they also followed Abel's example.

'It's a tidy plant as ever was planned, eh, Polly?' said the Count, as he and his fair partner wended their way homewards, presenting the appearance of a most respectable, well-to-do couple.

'Yes,' she replied; 'though I wish "the Wheedler" wasn't in it. D'ye think he's square, Jim?'

'Oh, he's right enough. Did you get all the tools I told you out of my room?'

'Yes, the fair wig and all; they're here,' she replied, holding up a hand-bag.

'All serene,' rejoined the Count, quietly. 'I hope we shan't have to squeeze old Reynolds much; he aint a bad sort in his way.'

CHAPTER XII.

'WHO'S HER COMPANION?'

If there is one point that strikes the analyst more than another in investigating the ever-bubbling elements of London society, it is the avid craving for news with which that society is afflicted. It must be, moreover, news of its own sort. It is no use telling it of the convulsions going on upon the Continent, of discoveries in Central Africa, or of the success of the Pacific railway; it will say 'Psha! I can see all that in the papers.' What it loves is a scandalous story of its own world, and sweeter to it than the honey of Hymettus is *la chronique scandaleuse*, which is as yet unknown to the general public.

About three days after Lady Trillamere's

fête a magnetic whisper ran through society that Mrs. St. Leger had gone off. Quiet country people would probably have exclaimed, 'How shocking! poor thing, was it scarlet fever or small pox?' The London world merely enquired breathlessly who with? Nobody knew. It was not Sir Alberic, for he had been seen on guard at St. James's only yesterday. Roland Dance also was at his accustomed desk in the War Office. Ere society could unravel the riddle, it was delighted with shock number two, and was made acquainted with the fact of the pretty house in May Fair being in the hands of the bailiffs. It really was quite interesting, there was to be a sale and all that sort of thing, and society already saw a pleasant afternoon mapped out for it. But who was the companion of Mrs. St. Leger's flight? Like the mysterious disappearance of a clergyman some few years back, it made all London agog to solve the secret. Four days had elapsed, five, and still Pauline's

cavalier was enveloped in mystery. Was it clear she had not gone alone? Quite. She had been seen at Dover with a tall blonde *roué*-looking man as her escort. It was most provoking. Here was Mrs. St. Leger, who had been regarded on the verge of running away for years, and now she had actually done so, nobody could make out who was the partner of her iniquity.

But at the end of the week, Bobby Troughton, the Queen's Messenger, arrived from Vienna, Timbuctoo, South America, or wherever it had pleased the Foreign Office to send him; and, strolling into the Anti-Lysistrata, was made acquainted with this last titbit of scandal, and of the mystery in which it was enshrouded.

Bobby, who was of a sporting turn of mind, burst into a loud guffaw. 'Lord, what a game,' he said at last: 'I'll bet a level fifty nobody guesses him in ten times. I'll lay one hundred to ten no one names him in three.'

The attention of the smoking-room was rivetted. Here was a man who evidently knew all about it.

'You met them then?' said Alec Merriott, who chanced to be among the congregation that evening.

'Yes. I came across them in my way through Paris,' replied Troughton, laughing, 'and little thought what speculations you were all indulging in here. How it would have amused Mrs. St. Leger if I could but have told her. What larks if I'd only known.'

'Confound it, man, who is he?' exclaimed Slane. 'Whose borne off *la reine gaillarde*, "foreign countries for to see." If you don't satisfy our curiosity directly, we'll put you on the fire till you boil. I'll ring and have one lit, if you tamper longer with our feelings.'

'Well, it is hard lines, for you fellows who have been picturing a case in the Divorce Court, and unlimited scandal to yourselves; but when I met Mrs. St. Leger, she

was on her husband's arm. You know she HAS a husband, albeit, she and Oxley didn't run much in couples.'

The disgust of the London world was intense, when in the course of the next day it permeated through its circles that Mrs. St. Leger had gone off with her own husband. She had been so long destined in their minds to furnish an *historiette* for their edification, that they could not forgive such a commonplace *dénouement* as the Oxley St. Legers flying from their common difficulties together. If poor Pauline had levanted with a rope-dancer, she couldn't have given rise to more bitter criticism than was now lavished on her past career, which in good truth was but too open to animadversion.

Lady Trillamere laughed loud and long when she heard the story. 'Poor Pauline,' she said, 'I knew she was in difficulties, but I never thought of her cutting the Gordian-knot in that fashion. I shouldn't wonder if they got on together capitally. They've

lived apart so long it will seem like a fresh *liaison* to both of them.'

No one had seen much of Ernest de Vitre these last few days. That gentleman indeed was in sore perplexity. The sole woman that he had ever really loved had suddenly appeared before him and asserted her claim to be his wife. Had moreover told him that if he refused to acknowledge her as such, she should establish her right to that position by law. True, she asked him only to acknowledge her as such, and she would be satisfied. She wanted nothing more from him; neither position nor income. He might, if he liked, keep it a secret from the world in which he lived. No difficulty much about this, you may say. But to a man like De Vitre there was much. It was not that he in the slightest degree contemplated forming another alliance. Matrimony entered in no wise into his scheme of life; but he was not prepared to face the upraised

eyebrows of his world by presenting a nobody to them as his bride. No necessity that he should, you will say. And yet there was. This cold, worldly, cynical man could not make up his mind again to part from the woman he had betrayed. He had been moved much, for him, at their interview; he had thought of little else since. Lady Mallandaine, anxious as she now was to terminate their flirtation, could but have felt piqued had she known how completely her image had faded from his mind. What he wanted was this. He wished Luce to return to him, but not as his wife. And yet he did not disguise from himself that she would never again come under roof of his, except in that position, and even then only because the law would give him power to compel her so doing.

His mind tossed by conflicting emotions, he drove down to Lincoln's Inn, to see his lawyers.

'The very man I was about to write to,' exclaimed Mr. Fielding, the senior partner. 'How are you, sir?'

'Oh, well enough, thanks; but what were you going to write to me about?'

'Why we have just received notice from Rixon and Cudforth that a lady, a Miss Luce Schwerin, claims to be your wife in pursuance of a somewhat irregular marriage contracted between you some seven or eight years ago at Lasterton, and that she intends to establish her position by law, should you repudiate her right to it without.'

'And what do you think of her claim?' asked De Vitre.

'Impossible to say as yet. I've no data at all to go upon. I look to you for a good deal of information. But there is one thing upon which I can at once relieve your mind. This is no attempt to extort money. They distinctly disclaim any demand for alimony or return to cohabitation. All they demand

is an admission that whatever ceremony took place between you constitute you *bonâ fide* man and wife. If we deny it, they say they can prove it, and will. Their story is, that their client all these years believed it no marriage, and wishes now simply to clear her reputation.'

'I may as well tell you all about it,' said De Vitre. 'It don't redound much to my credit; and is a story, as you will guess when you've heard it, that I am not much given to recounting. But there are two men, for all of us in this world, whom to lie to is useless —our doctor and our lawyer;' and without further preamble, De Vitre related *his* story of the Lasterton wedding.

Mr. Fielding heard him in silence; and, at the conclusion, asked somewhat abruptly, 'Are you thoroughly determined to contest this marriage, Mr. De Vitre?'

'Yes, of course. What makes you ask such a question?'

'Well, look here, sir. According to your

statement we have the marriage ceremony performed by a drawing-master in a school-room. Now, it doesn't require a child, much less a lawyer, to tell you that such a contract as that is simply a farce. That you have stated the circumstances to me as you assumed them at the time and suppose them still, I have no doubt. But, sir, is it probable for one moment that men high in the profession like Rixon and Cudforth would move a finger in a suit like this unless they had something to go upon? To a client who came to them with your story they would say at once you haven't the shadow of a case. Depend upon it, Mr. De Vitre, their client tells the history of this marriage very differently from you.'

De Vitre was at once struck with the keen reasoning of the lawyer. His shrewd, clever brain at once grasped the idea that what he had personally witnessed he might after all have not read aright. Men of less capacity would have obstinately persisted

that what had happened to themselves they must *ex necessitate rei* know all about. But there is no such fallacious axiom extant as that of 'Seeing is believing.' Have any two actors therein ever been found to agree in their story of the famous charge of the Light Brigade at Balaklava?

'What is your advice, then?' asked De Vitre, at length.

'My advice is this, that you occupy yourself with the "Times" while I go over and see Rixon and Cudforth. You see they bring this as an amicable suit, and therefore, although I can't expect them to show their trumps, they won't object to giving me some idea of the strength of their hand. Probably will not object to my knowing their client's version of the case.'

'You're right, Fielding; I'll wait. I may expect you back within the hour, I suppose?'

'That at the very outside; but they live no distance off, and I shall probably be back in something like half the time.'

Left to himself, De Vitre fell to musing over the lawyer's first question, 'Are you determined to contest this marriage?' He had answered promptly, 'Yes.' But was he so determined? To save his life, he could hardly have resolved which he most wished—whether that the marriage should be declared worthless, or that Luce should be indeed his own. The more he thought of it, the more undecided he felt about it. There would be much satisfaction, he mused, in bringing home the only woman he had really loved, and knowing that she was veritably his wife: his very own as much as anything else that appertained to him. For in his fierce selfish passion, he thought little of how Luce might regard such subjection. What was it to him what the world should say on the subject? He knew that world pretty well by this—had laughed at and played upon its weaknesses and vanities these last fifteen years. His lips curled as he reflected how he had made his own way in it—how prone it was,

like the spaniel, to lie down and kiss the hand that whipped it. Given anything like a start, and with a bitter tongue, inflexible will, and unscrupulous use of a knowledge of the game, who need fail in making his way therein? Men, ah! and women too, had worked their way into those inner circles by systematic boot-licking. De Vitre scorned sycophancy; he preferred to make his way as a man dangerous to offend. His epigrams had been things ill to provoke; and more than one lady of fashion had rather repented making an enemy of Ernest de Vitre. He was not wont to forgive, and could wait patiently as an Indian for an opportunity of vengeance.

This is no overcharged picture. Society fears one thing, and that is ridicule. You may lash its vices, satirise its follies in the aggregate, and it laughs with you and recks little: once ridicule the individual, and he winces. Moral opprobrium moveth him little; but to be the laughing-stock of the

town for forty-eight hours is to stand in the pillory indeed. De Vitre excelled in conducting such executions.

But his reflections are interrupted by the return of the lawyer.

'Well, sir,' he exclaimed, 'it is as I thought. Quite an amicable suit. I saw Rixon himself, and told him our case.'

'And what did he say?' asked De Vitre.

'Just what I told you, I'll give you his very words. "My dear Fielding," he said, "you can't suppose we should ever have dreamt of taking up such a case if your client's story were correct. The fact is, he was as much deceived as he deemed the lady, though through no instrumentality of hers. She has only been in possession of the real facts of the case quite lately. The question lies in a nutshell. The pseudo-drawing-master was a regular Baptist minister —the school-room a licensed Baptist chapel. We hold that constitutes a legal marriage. Our evidence, of course, we reserve as yet;

but you have only to send down to Lasterton, and make enquiries of the present minister and clerk, and look at the register, to see that we have a strong case."'

'And supposing Mr. Rixon's view to be correct, what is your opinion, then?' enquired De Vitre, somewhat abstractedly. His mind was still puzzled as to which issue he most desired on the subject.

'It is hard to say; very hard. There's a good deal of uncertainty when you put a case like this into a court of law. It's quite on the cards we might beat them. There are a dozen points we might raise. But, Mr. De Vitre, I tell you at once my opinion is, that if they can prove you were regularly married by a legitimate Baptist minister, in a chapel licensed for marriage, you are a *bonâ fide* married man this moment;' and the lawyer crossed his legs, and eyed his client narrowly.

De Vitre said nothing for a few moments, but remained absorbed in thought. At last,

raising his head, he remarked, 'You'd better send somebody down to Lasterton to look into this evidence. That is the *nom de guerre* I went by in those days,' he continued, tearing a leaf out of a note-book. When your emissary comes back, you will let me know. For the present, good-bye;' and shaking hands with the lawyer, De Vitre took his departure.

He paused for a moment, with his foot on the step of his brougham. 'Ah!' he muttered; 'I'll go down and see Dingwall, and ascertain if I can get a stall for this new comedy of Slane's on Thursday. Lyceum theatre, William;' and he threw himself back in the carriage.

The brougham whirls rapidly down Princes Street, crosses Drury Lane, and dashes into the top of Wellington Street. As it does so, shrieks, screams, and the wild rattle of a horse's hoofs on the stones, meet the coachman's ear. A glance reveals a runaway hansom coming down Bow Street, and within

twenty yards of him. He makes one useless effort to rein in his horses, and then with a hideous crash the affrighted cab-horse gallops headlong into the brougham. The coachman describes an arc through the air, then, meeting the pavement with a dull thud, bad to listen to, lies there bleeding and senseless. The centre of the street presents a chaos of splintered vehicles, broken harness, and struggling quadrupeds. All three horses are down. Suddenly, the upper door of the carriage is burst open, and, with his left arm dangling useless, and the blood streaming down his face, De Vitre tumbles out of the carriage. He struggles to his feet, when a kick from the plunging cab-horse catches him just above the groin, and stretches him senseless on the pavement. For a minute the heels of the maddened animal literally play round his unconscious head; then a bystander darts in and drags him clear of danger. By this time the police are on the spot, and in charge of the situation. Although

neither master nor man is capable of speech, De Vitre is too well known about town not to be identified; and the Inspector of Bow Street decides upon sending him home instead of to the hospital. A surgeon fortunately turned up—as, thanks to Providence, they mostly do on such occasions,—and under his charge De Vitre, on recovering consciousness, was carried back to Curzon Street, as tenderly as might be. That his arm is broken, and that he is suffering great agony from internal injury, is as much as can be ascertained at present.

The cabman was personally little the worse for the collision—a fact by no means so astonishing when it was discovered that, instead of being on his box, he was engaged in a neighbouring public-house at a game of chance much in vogue amongst the inhabitants of Bow Street, entitled 'Odd man out for quarterns round.' Popular opinion had at first inclined to the idea that he had been dashed into atoms too infinitesimal to pick up.

CHAPTER XIII.

'ALAS! FOR MAN'S VANITY.'

LIA REMINGTON looks rather faded and dejected as the season waxes towards its close. She deems the present campaign to have been so far most unsatisfactory. With the exception of the autumnal visit to Childerley, she had had little opportunity of coming to an explanation with Alec Merriott, and as we know, on that occasion he most carefully avoided any *éclaircissement*. She is uneasily conscious now that her feelings are much more involved than she would ever before acknowledge. As many a young lady has done before her, she has strained the line a little too tight, and it has broken in her hands. Your lover, like a good trout when he breaks away with the hook in his gills, is

apt to sulk in obscurity, and be rather shy of the lure in future. The victim often comforts himself with Burns's philosophy :—

> Ne'er break your heart for ae rebuke,
> But think upon it still, jo ;
> That, gin the lassie winna do't,
> Ye'll fin' anither will, jo.

You may think their quarrel ludicrous : that it is perfectly absurd to suppose so small a speech could give so great offence. You will probably assert that people don't quarrel about such trifles. But it is precisely over such trifles, as far as my knowledge of human nature goes, that we do quarrel most greviously and bitterly. We forgive great wrongs ; we get over much injustice dealt out to us ; unmerited abuse we condone, but once stab us in our vanity and the shaft rankles long in the wound. It is the master passion of mankind ; and man, or woman either, will forgive foul wrong easier than a heavy blow to the feeling which we all affect to despise, and all secretly cultivate.

And so, as Lia was wearied of town, and Mrs. Remington's sentiments were generally the reflex of her daughter's on such points, it had been settled that they should go down to Brighton for a fortnight. As Abel Somers had informed his colleagues at 'The Feathers,' he, the worthy Reynolds and the plate, moved off by a morning train to Twickenham. The ladies were not to depart until the afternoon. Mr. Remington having bade them good-bye, strolled down to his club to hear what might be going on in the world.

It was such a delicious summer morning that he found it but thinly peopled, and after twenty minutes' tumbling over of the papers, Mr. Remington felt that he did not quite know what to do with himself. He was like a fish out of water. He had given up his usual excursion to the City in order to say good-bye to his wife and daughter, and began to have rancorous feelings that their late breakfast hour had demanded such sacrifice on his part. At last, he thought he

would walk up and look at the Park. It was rarely indeed that Mr. Remington figured there in the morning. At the top of St. James's Street he suddenly encountered Alec Merriott.

'How are you, Captain Merriott?' he exclaimed. 'Why, I havn't seen anything of you for ages. If you are going up the Park way, let's walk together.'

'Most happy,' replied Alec, as the old gentleman hooked on to him.

'Getting doosed hot and dusty here, eh? My womenkind could stand it no longer, and are off to Brighton this afternoon. Do Lia good; she wants a little setting-up.'

'Miss Remington's not ill, I hope?' asked Alec.

'Oh no! Danced too much, or gallivanted about a little more than was good for her, perhaps. Wants a little quiet and sea air.'

'Yes; it's getting about time to give London up. I'm pretty well tired of it

myself. We move to York next month, I'm glad to say. We are in luck, and shall be in clover for the hunting season.'

'I say, what are you going to do to-night?' exclaimed Remington abruptly.

'I hardly know. Go down to Aldershott, I think.'

'But you're not obliged, are you?'

'No. I need not be back till to-morrow night. Why?'

'I have it. You and I'll run down to Twickenham. Come and have a quiet bachelor dinner with me. Nice and cool amongst the trees by the water to smoke a cigar afterwards. My housekeeper will knock us up something to eat, and I can guarantee you a decent bottle of claret.'

'It's a tempting offer,' said Merriott, smiling.

'Better than Aldershott; that's as hot and dusty as this, I should think. Bring your togs and sleep. Heaps of room; we've got the house to ourselves. Hulloa, here's Rum-

ford: I must speak to him. That's a bargain, eh? and you'll meet me at the station in time for the five-thirty train.'

'Thanks, yes. Suit me down to the ground.'

'All right; then, for the present, good-bye;' and Mr. Remington shot off to confabulate with his friend, who was also somehow mysteriously absent from the City this summer morning.

When Mr. Remington, after lunching at his club, once more regained his home, he was astonished to find there his wife and daughter.

'It's quite abominable,' exclaimed the elder lady. 'Just as we were about to start, I got this telegram. There's been some mistake, and they have no rooms for us at "The Grand." What we're to do I don't know. The servants all gone to Twickenham, and our things all packed up.'

'It is a bore, Papa,' said Lia, laughing. 'You see you've your club; but I don't know

how mamma and I are to get any dinner to-night.'

'Reynolds is a fool,' said Mr. Remington, 'a blundering old idiot to make such a bungle about your rooms. But, Mrs. Remington, I rise to the emergency. Your things are packed, and the servants at Twickenham. We will go to the servants. As it happens, I have asked Captain Merriott to come out there with me by the five-thirty train, and telegraphed to Mrs. Edwards to have some dinner for us, so you ladies will be all right, though Merriott and I may have to take it out in bread and cheese.'

Lia's heart gave a great jump. If a girl could not conquer a man's sulks in a family party like that—well she had lived in the world for nothing. How she mentally blessed the stupidity of Reynolds!

'Oh, I don't know, Mr. Remington,' replied her mother. 'You men have nothing to do but throw a few things into a port manteau—'

'Nonsense, Mamma,' interrupted Lia, 'we can just take our small boxes and dressing bags. It will be very jolly. Ring and tell the maids at once. We're all ready as soon as we've put on our bonnets, Papa.'

'Well, you see,' said Mr. Remington, addressing his wife, 'you know there's nothing to eat here, there will be at Twickenham.'

'Of course,' exclaimed Lia. 'We will make a regular picnic of it.'

Alec Merriott, his portmanteau, and his faithful henchman were duly deposited at the Waterloo Station some five minutes before the time appointed.

Leaving the procuring of tickets to Butters, Alec strolled down the platform in search of his host, and speedily found himself in presence of the Remingtons. To say that he was not considerably taken aback, would be absurd. He would most emphatically have declined the invitation had he contemplated Lia forming one of the party. He foresaw the awkwardness of his situation just

as quickly as Miss Remington had appreciated the advantages that would probably lie at her disposal. But of course there was nothing left him but to shake hands and pronounce it an unexpected pleasure.

'Indeed, it is,' replied honest Mrs. Remington, and goes far to reconcile me to missing our rooms at Brighton. 'We've seen next to nothing of you lately.'

Alec muttered something about the multiplicity of engagements the end of the season always involved, and encountered a most incredulous glance of Lia's dark eyes with easy indifference.

But while the train whirls them over the dozen or so miles that lie between Waterloo Station and Twickenham, we must glance forward at the Villa, and contemplate the effect there of the telegram sent off by Mr. Remington some two or three hours before. In the housekeeper and butler the message produced merely fuss, fidget, and ejaculation; but in Abel Somers's breast it wrought dire

consternation. What was he to do? How was he to communicate the change in affairs to his comrades at 'The Feathers?' Nay, even if he could have sent a message to 'The Feathers,' it would have been useless; it was not likely that either the Count or his coadjutors would be there this evening. The rendezvous at 'The Blue Boar' seemed to offer the only chance of telling them things looked hopeless for to-night, and it so happened that Abel did not know exactly where that was. Mr. Reynolds meanwhile required his assistance in unpacking some of the plate. Abel gloated over the silver as the immortal 'fat boy' did over the pastry, and finally began to meditate whether it was necessarily 'all up' with the night's campaign. True, the addition of Mr. Remington and Captain Merriott to the garrison made the affair far more risky; still, he thought, it was not altogether impracticable, if he could but communicate their arrival to the Count, and make him understand that he must be guided en-

tirely by him, Abel Somers, as to whether it should be attempted or not. The gentlemen might be locked in their rooms by way of precaution, and with care, he thought, need not be disturbed. The first thing was to scribble a line to 'The Blue Boar' and, if possible, get it conveyed there. This was soon done, and addressed to an *alias* often used by the Count. Then feigning to feel unwell, he easily obtained Reynolds's leave to take a turn for ten minutes or so in the open air. He walked down to the gate, and after about a quarter of an hour caught a grocer's boy driving a light cart leisurely back to Twickenham. Yes, he knew 'The Blue Boar' well enough, and readily engaged for sixpence down and the promise of a shilling on delivery, to see that the note reached its destination.

This little bit of business satisfactorily despatched, Abel Somers walked back, and resumed his labours with a mind much relieved. But his tranquillity was destined to

be short lived. About an hour afterwards the door bell rang loudly, and following his superior, in obedience to the summons, Abel, to his horror, found the whole Remington family, with two ladies' maids and a footman, besides Captain Merriott and the redoubtable Butters. This was reinforcing the garrison with a vengeance—it defied calculation. Abel Somers could but feel that

> 'The best laid schemes o' mice an' men
> Gang aft a-gley.

The Count was a mighty genius, and had been so far a most successful marauder, but to all great men come their Moscows and Sedans, and verily the Count's Leipsic seemed near at hand. As for 'the Simple un,' he felt fairly bewildered by the conglomeration of adverse circumstances.

Dinner is over, and the gentlemen have followed the ladies to the drawing-room. The French windows stand invitingly open. The moon bathes the velvety turf and gay flower-beds in a sheen of silver light, and

shimmers over the glittering river. The air is perfumed with the roses, now in all their splendour and glory. Fitter night for the reconciliation of lovers the sun had never set upon.

'Let us walk down to the river, Captain Merriott,' said Lia, as she gazed out upon it.

He assented silently, and the two paced across the grass towards it. Lia waited patiently for Merriott to open the conversation; but his commonplace, when it did come, 'What a delicious evening!' rather irritated her.

'Yes:' she retorted, abruptly, 'you can smoke, if you like.'

'Thanks,' replied Alec, leisurely kindling a cabana. He felt there was support in tobacco, and he was of no mind at present to come to terms with his fair foe. He felt, moreover, a little nervous about the assault which he saw was imminent.

Lia paused for a little, and then said, rather abruptly, 'Why do you never come

near me now, Captain Merriott? I want the truth, please, and not the commonplace excuses you made to Mamma in the train.'

'One don't want to be preternaturally clever, Miss Remington, to take a hint. I got mine, and acted accordingly,' said Alec, slowly.

Wretch, she thought, I used to scold him for calling me Lia, why does he not do it now?

'I don't understand you,' she said at last.

'Perhaps not. I am afraid we have misunderstood each other for some time.'

Lia's cheeks flushed, and she bit her lips. She was a proud girl, and had she not been very much in earnest she had said no more, but then you see she was. So swallowing her pride with a little gulp, she faltered out, 'I am afraid I was very rude to you that day at Lord's. I don't quite know what I said' (she did, but you could scarcely expect absolute truth from a woman under the circumstances), 'but I was so disappointed at

your getting out so soon. Won't you forgive me?' and Lia looked up at her companion in a manner that no man, other than a guardsman or light dragoon sore wounded in his vanity, could have steeled himself to resist.

It might have been there was protection in the smoke wreaths evolved from that confounded cabana. The sweet face might have been but dimly discernible through that villanous haze, I know not. But Alec replied, sententiously——

'I have nothing to forgive. You only told me I couldn't play cricket. You were quite right, I couldn't that day. I think I can sometimes; but we're conceited brutes, most of us.'

Her tone changed quick as lightning. 'Thanks, Captain Merriott,' she replied, gaily, 'I have made my confession, and my conscience is at rest. You have granted me absolution. I felt rather penitent about my rudeness to you that day. I am aware that

rudeness is rather in fashion now-a-days, but I don't affect ever to be in the extreme of the *mode*. How pretty that boat looks crossing the moonlight into the shadow, doesn't it?

A little more desultory conversation, and then Miss Remington pronounced it chilly, and they walked back towards the house.

'Small chance of our ever being anything to each other now,' thought Lia, indignantly, as she stepped into the drawing-room; 'and I am afraid I've been fool enough to go very near loving him.'

Mdlle. Suzanne down stairs meanwhile had been exercising the whole artillery of her fascinations on the susceptible Butters. Deaf as the adder to the voice of the charmer had been the grim Yorkshireman at first. He rolled himself up, socially, after the manner of the hedgehog, and presented nothing but bristles to the housekeeper's room, but he melted gradually under the *agaceries* of the *soubrette*, and at length their talk waxed confidential and loving as of old.

'And you ain't seen Flippington lately?'

'*Non.* He ~~*bête*~~, like you all. Me no seen him dis long time. You all alike, you men; you make *l'amour*, den you go away,' replied Suzanne, with a toss of her head.

'But we come back again, you see,' said Butters, with what he meant for an insinuating grin.

'*Je ne sais pas. Dites moi*, Monsieur Bouttare, why *le Capitaine* he no visit Mdlle. Lydia *maintenant*?'

'He does. Why bless you! ain't he here now? Ain't you got eyesight, Suzanne? Can't you see as far as the distance post without glasses? Why we're in the straight-run in now, we are.'

'*Imbécile!* you understand noting. *Ah! voilà la sonnette de Mademoiselle. Bon soir, Monsieur.* I must go.'

'Good night!' said Butters, clasping her hand affectionately. 'There's only Mrs. Edwards here, and she's asleep. You couldn't—'

'I no understand,' cried Suzanne laughing, as she snatched her hand away. '*Mon Dieu*,' she said, when she gained the door, 'how much more I have to teach you to take, not ask. *Vous etes un sot amoureux, Monsieur.*'

Left to himself, it occurred to Mr. Butters that a sedative in the shape of a pipe would be pleasant before he retired to bed, and he accordingly let himself out into the garden by a side door, with a view to such indulgence.

Having got his pipe under way to his satisfaction, Mr. Butters began to moralise after his wont. 'You're a-making of a fool of yourself agin, my boy,' he mused. 'With your experience, you knows well fillies ain't to be relied on: why can't you let 'em alone? She's clean in her pasterns this one, good pints, head well set on, and all the rest of it, but her eye shows temper. Damme, ain't you reckoned her up afore, and didn't you say "she won't break." She'd kick the machine to pieces in double harness, that's

wot she'd do. No, my boy, she'd be more likely to comb your hair with a three-legged stool, than get your gruel ready for you. You've been a one-horse machine a good bit, and I reckon you had better remain so. Double harness is more gaudy like, but it's mighty dubersome. Hulloa, who are you?'

'Dear me, Mr. Butters,' replied 'the Simple un,' 'I'd no idea you vos here. I just slipped out to do a little something in that vay myself.'

'Come along, old boy, and we'll have a jolly good smoke together. I wos just a-longing for some one to change idees with.'

Nothing could have been more unwelcome to Abel than the appearance of Butters. Engaged all the evening in his vocation, it had struck him that if he could but slip out into the grounds at night he might encounter his confederates, and warn them from further prosecution of their enterprise. He was congratulating himself on having successfully

achieved his point, when Butters' unwelcome salutation met his ear.

Fortunately 'the Simple un,' deeming his vigil might be of some length, had slipped a pipe into his pocket to wile away the time, and therefore had no difficulty in substantiating his story. He lit it, and clung vaguely to the hope that he might possibly wear out his companion's patience. But, anxious in his mind, he unfortunately adopted the worst possible mode of so doing. He didn't talk. Butters consequently ran garrulously on, and narrated various sporting events that had been brought to a successful termination solely through the acuteness and supernatural intelligence of him—Butters. When 'the Simple un' said he should stop out for one more pipe, but couldn't think of keeping Mr. Butters up, Butters laughed at the idea, said 'he was just a man after his own heart, and he was game to smoke and tell stories with him till sunrise.'

There is a legend of a noted talker who

upon one occasion travelled five-and-twenty miles in a railway carriage with a deaf and dumb man, and, utterly unconscious of his companion's infirmity, pronounced him afterwards to be one of the most agreeable fellows he had ever had the luck to meet.

Mr. Butters's was an analogous case, and when 'the Simple un' finally yielded to fate, and they returned to the house together, the Yorkshireman was so pleased with his companion that, as he bade him 'Good night,' he remarked, 'I likes you; you're a good sort, and I'll do you a turn. Mind what I say. Don't you back nothing for t' Leger till you hear from me, and then you put it on. We've something dark our way this year that will rather wake up Newmarket. But mum's the word,' said Mr. Butters, with intense solemnity, 'till the time comes. When it does you'll have the office,' and with a wink, expressive as Lord Burleigh's nod, that worthy vanished.

As for 'the Simple un,' he saw nothing to

be done, but to seek his pillow, and await the chapter of events. The locking of the garden-door had been confided to Butters, and he had not only scrupulously performed it, but put the key in his pocket.

CHAPTER XIV.

'DEFEAT OF THE COMMUNISTS.'

'THE Blue Boar' is by no means an uncommon sign. In the course of many and varied wanderings up and down the earth, I remember to have been indebted to 'Blue Boars' of divers descriptions for nutriment and lodging. I have encountered the cerulean beast in many shapes—I mean as regards inns; from a cleanly bread and cheese cabaret that I wot of by the side of a brawling Hampshire trout stream, up to a mammoth hotel in the heart of the 'black country.'

The embryo grocer, who had taken charge of 'the Simple un's' note, displayed exceeding good faith and much business-like anxiety to acquire the additional shilling that was to

accrue to him on successful delivery of the billet, but he failed *in toto*. He hung persistently about a hostelrie of that name in Twickenham, whereas 'The Blue Boar' patronized by the Count and his coadjutors was a roadside tavern some two miles nearer London, and a noted flash house.

The Twickenham clocks are pealing out midnight as a light tax-cart rumbles through the little town. Three men are seated in front, placidly enjoying their tobacco. Behind, amongst the vegetables and garden stuff, with which the vehicle is apparently freighted, lies coiled up a boy, and as the brilliant moon lights up his elfish features one may recognise a specimen of the unmistakable street Arab, the precocious London *gamin*. The cart jogs on in silence for the most part; nothing beyond an occasional word passing between the trio; until the driver pulls up at the corner of a bye lane, about a third of a mile from the Remington's villa, and exclaims—

'Here we are; now tumble out all of you. You and 'the Wheedler' look after the tools, Bill, while I give this young gallows imp his final instructions. Now Pippin, my chick,' he continued, 'you're a boy what's likely to be a credit to your bringing up, if hempen fever or a Judge's ticket for change of air don't interfere with your professional prospects. This is the first big thing I've ever brought you out on. Don't let me find that you ain't what I took you for, or maybe the only legal ceremony that you'll ever be involved in will be a coroner's inquest puzzling over what you died of precisely. You know me, and I aint to be trifled with.'

The boy's shrewd face dissolved into a broad grin as he listened to this exordium.

'You tried me afore, Count,' he replied. 'Turning nose ain't in me. I twigs what I've to do. Keep my trap shut, my listeners open, and stick close to orders, ain't it?'

'Yes. You'll do. Now draw the cart well under the shadow of those trees, and

don't be seen, if you can help it. If anybody does find you, you're waiting for—what?'

'My master, which he's a market gardener; and we've broke this here trace, and he's gone back to see if he can find any one to give him a bit of string to splice it with,' exclaimed 'the Pippin,' breathlessly.

'All right. You don't move from here, mind, unless you hear my whistle.'

'I'm fly,' answered the boy.

The trio now moved on, quite unconscious of how luck had been running against them at the villa. A more scientific burglary could scarcely have been planned. It was one of the Count's happiest inspirations. It had been worked out with marvellous care and patience. For a good two months had the abstraction of Mr. Remington's plate been the study of that mighty genius. Now he had but to grasp the reward of his toils. An elderly butler, a page, and three women were the sole garrison, with the additional advantage to the assailants of a confederate

within the gates. What could be easier? The Count smiled derisively at the simplicity of mankind and the facility accorded to communism.

Scorning the windy arguments of platform orators, or the empty meetings of Trafalgar Square, the Count reduced communism to practice, while men of inferior parts mouthed over it theoretically. Still waters ever run deepest; and though the Count was not without some abstract visions regarding a general upheaval of the masses, and the plundering of London, he dismissed such dreams with a sigh, as too advanced as yet for the age, and confined himself, as most clear-headed men do, to what lay within his power to achieve. 'Property is theft,' quoth M. Proudhon, an axiom the Count thoroughly endorsed. Being a practical man, he considered the only remedy for such a social evil was of the homœopathic character: *Similia similibus curantur.* Property being theft, the corrective was obviously thieving.

Good men, we are told, work secretly, and deprecate the blazoning of their good deeds to the world. Whether he was influenced by this feeling, or whether the legal trammels which as yet shackle our complete regeneration and enlightenment, swayed his mighty mind, it is hard to say; but the fact remains that when he did open his lips it was to curse Diana's rays incontinently.

'A cursed night, Bill,' he exclaimed, as they arrived at the fence which separated the villa grounds from the road. 'It couldn't be brighter if it was the sun shining. We must creep up under the shade of the shrubbery to the left there, and then see what we make of it.'

It will be remembered that Lia's room had been fixed upon as the point of attack. That young lady had retired to her chamber near upon two hours previously; and after musing over the events of the evening, had finally sought her couch, with a dull aching sensation of disappointment. I don't mean

for one moment that she bedewed her pillow with tears, the girls of our generation are above such mawkish sentimentalism, and Lia especially was far beyond such rhapsodical weakness; but she did feel sore at heart, as the conviction forced itself on her that she had thrown away the love she coveted, and that to lure it back was now beyond her power. She had toyed with it, and esteemed it but lightly, until she awoke to the fact that she had lost it. No uncommon case! The male creature is selfish, irritable, and exacting, for the most part, when hard hit; easily wounded in his self-love, although professing to be wrapped up in another. Woman is tyrannical by nature, and for the life of her can hardly resist exercising the man within her toils.

Lia had looked out upon the night for some minutes before undressing. Struck with its beauty, she threw up her window to enjoy another breath of the flower-scented air; and then everything seemed so still, the faint

breezes, scarce whispering through the trees, kissed her cheeks so softly, that she determined to leave the top of her window open.

Our three communists had easily, from the Count's previous investigations, made out Miss Remington's window. Yes; there it was! They could see it from the adjoining shrubbery; the sill not four feet from the ground, and open at the top. 'The Simple un' had evidently done his part!

'Now,' said the Count, 'I've no doubt it's all plain sailing, but it's no use ever throwing a chance away. That projection throws a shadow which extends up to the window we want. We'll nip across that bit of grass quick to that bit of cover. Come along,' and the three dusky figures flitted like ghosts across the moonlit turf.

But already the Fates were unpropitious. A pair of lazy grey eyes were aroused to an expression of positive interest, and Alec Merriott, removing a half-smoked regalia from

his lips, muttered—'Damn it, were they men, or am I dreaming?'

The fact was, that Alec, an habitually late man, had left the smoking-room with his host about twelve. On arriving at his own chamber, he felt that sleep at present was simply preposterous. What should he do? read? no; he felt like more tobacco. His nerves wanted soothing, so he lit a huge regalia, put his candle on the mantelpiece, threw open the window, and seating himself thereby, commenced smoking seriously and reflectively. Now it so happened that the curtains of the bed effectually masked the faint glimmer of Alec's candle, and therefore the Count and his companions had not noticed the light, a subject always of much dislike and misgiving to your communist when exercising his vocation.

The villa was a one-story building, something in the form of an E; a shortish middle piece, from which ran two rather long wings. The centre piece contained a good entrance-

hall, a drawing-room, and dining-room. The right-hand wing contained the smoking-room, billiard-room, housekeeper's room, pantry, &c. The left, with which we have more immediately to do, consisted first of a very pretty boudoir; then came Miss Remington's room; and next, with a bay window projecting into the garden, was the music or morning-room; beyond this were a couple of bed-rooms, and the further of these was the room now tenanted by Alec Merriott. The shadow cast by this bay window was the cover which the three equalisers of property had made for. It follows consequently, that, as soon as they cleared the turf between that and the shrubbery, this projection hid them from Merriott's sight.

The cigar had proved soothing, and Alec was gazing dreamily out on the moonlight when the three almost vanishing figures caught his eye. He started to his feet, and leant eagerly out, but they had disappeared, and he could see nothing. Were they men,

or had it been mere fancy? He felt that he had been half asleep; still it was scarcely possible it could be mere imagination. If they were men, what did it mean? what were they about? what business had they there? For a few seconds Alec pondered over these things, and then opened his door. Another minute, and a piercing shriek saluted his ears, quickly followed by another, from the direction of Miss Remington's room, and then all was still.

Arrived under Lia's window, the Count had gently raised the lower sash and stepped softly inside. Taking it for granted the room was empty, he for once forgot his caution, and scarcely glancing round it, turned to give a hand to Casey. Slight as the noise was, it awoke Lia. She raised herself in the bed, and at once became conscious that two men were in her room, and a third just getting through the window. Whether the strong-minded woman of the age would have boldly confronted the aggressors, and commenced a

voluble lecture on the rights of woman generally, and the sanctity of her bed-chamber in particular, I can't say; I think it is probable that she would; and had I been carrying out communist principles, I admit that I should have been more awed thereby than even by a revolver. But Lia being only a warm-hearted English girl, gave one tremendous shriek, jumped out of bed, and ran to the door. Ere she could open it, she was in the Count's grasp, and another scream escaped her lips.

'Stow that!' he exclaimed, with a ferocious execration, as he placed his hand over her mouth. 'If you give tongue again, I'll cut your throat. Now, girl,' he continued, shaking her roughly, 'who the —— are you?'

But the fierce interrogatory elicited no reply, for Lia had tumbled back into the Count's arms senseless. He dropped her quietly on the carpet. 'Curse it, Bill, what are we to do?—this ain't one of the servants,'

he said, bending over Lia's prostrate form. 'This is the girl of the house; I know her well. There's a screw loose in the business somewhere.'

Ere Casey could reply, the door was burst open by Merriott. One glance at Lia's prostrate form, another at the burglars, and he comprehended the situation. With a cry of thieves, that rang through the house like a clarion, Alec dashed in like a bulldog, and disposing of the Count with a terrific left-hander, that stretched him by Lia's side on the floor, turned his attention to Casey. He was a grim, wiry customer this, and knew that, like a rat in a corner, he must fight. What the result might have been it is impossible to tell, but a crashing blow from 'the Wheedler's' life preserver felled Alec senseless to the ground.

But now the pattering of feet and the resonance of voices was heard.

'It's all up, Wheedler; let's see if we can bring off the Count,' cried Casey, as he

raised their well-nigh stunned leader, and half carried him towards the window.

'Come on, the villains is this way,' cried Butters, in the distance.

'The game's up, Bill; he must take his chance,' exclaimed 'the Wheedler,' as he jumped into the garden, and then sped like a hare for the road.

'Curse it, shake yourself together, Count,' cried the ever-loyal Casey, half pushing his leader across the window-sill. But one of Alec's straight left-handers was not quite so quickly got over, and the Count, still half dazed, stumbled and fell heavily as he alighted.

At this moment Butters, armed with a poker, and followed by a couple of footmen, entered the room just in time to see Casey jump through the window.

'There the scoundrels go!' he cried, dashing across in pursuit.

Casey was still making a last effort to get the Count upon his legs when he became

aware of a man on the window-sill above him making strenuous efforts to hit him with a poker. Drawing a life preserver, he aimed one savage but ineffectual blow in return, and then took to his heels. In another minute the Count was Butters's prisoner!

By this time Mr. Remington, who slept in the upper part of the house, had appeared upon the scene, as indeed, for the matter of that, had every soul within the villa. Terrible was his distress upon encountering the apparently lifeless form of his daughter, as, enveloped in a blanket, Reynolds carried his young mistress to her mother's room. A messenger was sent for the doctor, and another for the police. Butters meanwhile had escorted his prisoner within doors, and stood grimly gazing at him with a vague idea that he had seen him before.

'D—n him! he hits hard,' at last ejaculated the Count. 'I'm all abroad still. Taken, eh! What Butters! how the devil did you get here? Well, never mind; as you are

here, get me some brandy, water, and a clean towel.'

Butters gave vent to a prolonged whistle.

'Well, this dangs all Yorkshire!' he exclaimed at last. 'Flippington it is, as I'm a sinner! Well, I'm d—d!' and here, utterly overcome by the discovery, his speech failed him, and he relapsed into an incontinent stare at his captive.

'Well, you old picture card, didn't you ever see a gentleman after he had got a mauling?' said the Count, angrily. 'Why don't you get me what I want, instead of turning your top lights on at full power, as if you were at the Italian Opera for the first time?'

Thus adjured, Butters called to one of the maid servants to endeavour to satisfy the Count's requirements, he himself meanwhile keeping grim watch and ward over his prisoner.

After a stiff glass of brandy-and-water, and washing the blood from his face,

the distinguished communist speedily became himself.

'Anyone trapped but me, Butters?' he enquired, affably.

'No; it ain't my fault; I did my best to knock one of your pals over with a poker. He twigged the attention, and did his d—dest to cave in my head with a life preserver. Then he legged it; and I knocked you down, before I found the fight was all out of you. You ain't by no means a good lot, Flippington; and it strikes me you've been doing a cross in this here business; but I shouldn't have hit you, if I'd known the Captain had polished you off first.'

'Yes,' said the Count, grimly, 'I was down before I could draw a life preserver. Lucky, perhaps, for your master. The house is full, eh?'

'Well, there's more people about, I reckon, than you counted on.'

'And Mdlle. Suzanne—is she here?'

'By gum! I never thought of that. What a game! Oh, yes; she's here. My eye, how pleased she'll be to see you,' and the Yorkshireman went off into a dry convulsive cachinnation, as was his wont when immensely pleased.

But Mr. Butters's ecstasies were cut short by the arrival of the police, and an intimation from Reynolds that his master required his services. That Alec had come to serious harm in the fray had in no wise as yet presented itself to the mind of his faithful follower. In his eager pursuit of the flying burglars, his master's prostrate form had escaped his notice, and he was much moved upon finding Merriott stretched on his bed bleeding and insensible.

'This is serious, Mr. Remington,' said the doctor, quietly, as his keen surgical scissors made ruthless work with Alec's fair hair. 'Water and a towel—quick, some of you,' he continued, as the wound lay bare before him. 'As I feared,' he muttered, washing the blood

away, 'his skull is fractured. This will probably be a tedious affair, sir; and not unaccompanied with danger. You must make up your mind to its being some weeks before this gentleman can be moved.'

'Moved!' ejaculated Mr. Remington, indignantly. 'He needn't leave this till he pleases, and everything you can think of shall be done for him. Two heads are better than one, doctor; name your own man, and I'll telegraph to London for him to meet you. I wouldn't have him go the wrong way for any sum you could name.'

I have sometimes thought that of all the blessings great wealth confers on its possessors, perhaps none equals this—the knowledge that when those near and dear to us are laid low, we can summon at will all that skill and science can do to confront the destroying angel. It may be in vain; but it is much comfort to the survivors to think that no stone was left unturned in that fell hour of trial. Think of the bitter sting left

often in the bosoms of the poor who have seen the loved one fade away, and are haunted with the sad suspicion that perchance better advice, more genial climate, or other luxury, might still have preserved to them the life they so mourn. Talk of the bitterness of death being past! —what can equal the tortured feelings of those who have seen those most loved and dearest to them perish for want of what they implicitly believe would have averted the stroke?

It's a hard world, my masters; and till chaos be come again, that doom is decreed to many of the toilers herein—bitterest draught ever quaffed from life's goblet, though it be!

Lia has come to by this; and, though a little tearfully, is laughing at herself for having been so foolish as to faint—a little hysterical in her laughter all the same, as yet.

'Very stupid of me, mother; but three

burglars in one's bedroom without notice *are* agitating. And when that man shook me, and talked about cutting my throat, I couldn't help it.'

'My darling,' replied Mrs. Remington, 'you mustn't talk. The doctor said you were to be quiet. I'm sure you did wonders to arouse the house. I should have fainted in bed, I'm positive.'

'Perhaps it would have been more judicious.'

'Now do lie down, there's a dear. Suzanne will take every care of you. I want to go and ask about Captain Merriott.'

'Why? What of him, mother?' exclaimed Lia, anxiously.

'Nothing, child; but I know he was a little hurt in the fight,' replied Mrs. Remington, hurriedly; and then, becoming suddenly alive to the extreme injudiciousness of her remark, she abruptly left the room.

'What is this, Suzanne?' inquired Lia, sharply.

'Noting, Mademoiselle — noting of any consequence, I tink.'

'You'll be good enough to tell me the exact truth,' said her mistress, sternly.

And then Suzanne, with much protestation against doing so, blurted out the whole story, with all the combined volubility of a lady's-maid and a Frenchwoman.

'And do they say he is much hurt?' asked Lia.

'I hardly know, Mademoiselle. The doctor he with him now. *Mon Dieu!* I saw him carried off to his room. *Il était si pale, si pale, il ~~paraît~~ comme un cadavre.* Dey say he was ~~*mal*~~ *blessé.* I no know—he looked ~~*beaucoup*~~ *malade.*'

était / gravement / bien /

Lia lay back and closed her eyes. Love is a dreadfully selfish passion, and I am afraid that Miss Remington at this moment was more lapped in the Elysian thought that Alec had risked his life in her defence than ought else. Bear in mind that she was accustomed to Suzanne's exaggerated and

gesticulative style of narration, and did not at all realise that Alec might be hurt even unto death. No woman would, of course, acknowledge it; and yet I could fancy one who really loved wishing that the object of her attachment should die in this wise sooner than that he should recover to throw off her fetters. That these were Lia's feelings, I beg thoroughly to deny.

But after a few minutes in that happy dreamland, Miss Remington's thoughts once more reverted to this prosaic world, and Suzanne was despatched to enquire further particulars concerning Captain Merriott's injuries. But ere that damsel's return, Mrs. Remington entered the room again.

'How is he, mother?' asked Lia.

'Dear me, child, you ought to be asleep. You were to be kept quiet, the doctor—'

'Ah, never mind the doctor,' interrupted Lia. 'I'm all right again, and quite strong; but I must know how Alec Merriott is, mother.'

'I wish I had told you nothing about it.'

'It would have made no difference,' said Lia, in a steady tone that the twitching lips rather belied. 'Suzanne has told me everything. Answer my question, mother; and tell me the whole truth, please.'

'Well, my dear, we must hope for the best; but poor Captain Merriott is very seriously hurt. I have just seen your father, who has telegraphed to London for further advice. The medical man at present attending him says it is serious, and may be dangerous; but he don't in the least despair of his getting over it.'

'Thank God!' murmured Lia, softly.

'Meanwhile he can't be moved, and we must nurse him the best we can.'

A little throb of exultation ran through Lia's heart at this announcement. Verily, it did seem as if the Fates had given this man into her hand. There must be moral ossification of the man's heart who does not succumb to the attentions of a pretty woman

during a tedious convalescence; and when he happens to be a piqued lover to boot, I should think Cupid would really think it a case that hardly called for any active intervention on his part. Alec Merriott, lying senseless on his bed, had but two courses open to him, if he did but know it—Death or Matrimony.

CHAPTER XV.

'DEATH OF DE VITRE.'

The soft, fresh air of a bright summer morning stole into the luxuriously-furnished chamber in which Ernest de Vitre lay dying. The best medical advice of the metropolis had collected around that bedside on which the strong, selfish, cynical man of twenty-four hours ago now tossed, a mutilated fever-stricken wreck. And upon this occasion, at all events, doctors did not differ. His arm had been set; but the medical men, with one accord, pronounced the internal injuries fatal, and that, as far as human eye could foresee, his hours were numbered. When sense had first returned to him, he muttered incoherently. They could only catch disjointed sentences, in which the names of Luce,

Wyndham, and Fielding were unconnectedly uttered. As the day dawned he dozed a little; then, suddenly awaking with a start, exclaimed—

'Luce, where are you? Where am I? What does it all mean?'

'You must be quiet, Sir,' said his valet, gently. 'You are in your own home. You had a bad accident, yesterday.'

'Ah! I think I remember now. That cursed horse—he kicked. They will—like men—when they're down. God! this pain is awful. Give me something, Fletcher. Bah! not that—laudanum, you fool! That's the only thing drowns pain or misery. You know where it is—quick, man!'

For a second the valet hesitated, although he knew his master habitually used the drug.

'Idiot!' said De Vitre, 'I don't want to know what the doctors say. Do my bidding!' And, as he spoke, the beads stood on his brow from the intensity of the pain he experienced.

He swallowed the dose his servant handed him, and then threw himself back on his pillow. For some minutes his contorted features showed that his suffering was intense; then, apparently, the paroxysm ceased, and he became more tranquil. He closed his eyes, and seemed to sleep for some little time. At length, rousing himself, he said—

'How long do they give me? What do the doctors say, eh?'

'That you must keep quiet, and are dangerously hurt,' replied the valet.

'They haven't the honesty to speak out, even now,' retorted De Vitre, with a sneer; as if I didn't know the conventionalities of the profession. They won't make much out of me, anyhow. I don't require to be told I'm dying. If they were not charlatans altogether, they might at least compute how many hours I have left—. Well, it don't matter—they're not many. Send to Major Gwynne to come here as soon as possible, and to Mr. Fielding to say that I want to

see him this afternoon. I shall last out the day, I fancy.'

Within a couple of hours Wyndham arrived. He had heard of De Vitre's accident late on the previous evening at his club, but had no suspicion of its serious nature. Rumour there had appraised it at no more than a broken arm. The messenger had found him—as was likely at that early hour of the morning—in bed; but he at once got up, dressed, and obeyed his whilom friend's mandate. Of course they had constantly met, but no intimacy had existed between them since Gwynne's return from India. Fletcher, in the note he had written, had given Wyndham to understand that his master was on his death-bed.

De Vitre's dark eyes lit up as he saw Gwynne. 'Thanks,' he said. 'Now, no platitudes about regrets at seeing me in this state. Time don't admit of them. The sands of my hour-glass are running out apace, and I have one or two things to do,

if I can, before life has left me. Give me that note-case, Fletcher—no, give it Major Gwynne—I forgot I was helpless. Take out a card there of Madam Luce, *modiste*, Upper Street, Islington. That's Luce Schwerin, Wyndham! I must see her again before I die; and you must fetch her as quick as may be. I haven't strength to tell you the story; she can if she likes. Will you do what I ask?'

'Of course. I am off to Islington at once. Shocked as I am to see you in this state, De Vitre, I know you well of old. You'd far rather I did your bidding at once than murmur useless condolence at your bedside. Luce shall be here as quick as I can contrive it.'

'Thanks,' replied Ernest, with a faint smile. 'I knew I could depend upon you. You're of my day, when men, even in their follies and vices, stood true as steel to each other. The present generation can't trust each other in their iniquities. They would rook their best friend or leave him in the lurch if the

tide set dead against him. We were, perhaps, no better, but we had more pluck.'

It is a queer theme to moralise on, but the decadence of our national character has been dwelt upon by more than one of our great writers. There is much truth in Ernest de Vitre's remark. As he says, even in the fast circles of the upper class men stood more to their drowning comrades than they do now. As you descend, money becomes the sole touchstone. We have set up the golden calf, and worship it quite as persistently as ever they did in Judea. But woe comes to the prophets of Baal; and, although the national coach at present runs smoothly, the road begins to present a very volcanic formation. We have seen the framework of a nation riven within a few miles of us. Remembering Mr. Lowell's wonderful tale of the 'One 'Oss Shay,' our rulers will do well to see our state chariot's repairs timely seen to.

Luce was sitting languidly over the *débris*

of her breakfast when a sharp tap at the door interrupted her meditations. She raised her head, but, ere her lips could utter the customary formula, the door opened, and Wyndham Gwynne appeared.

'Good heaven! my guardian, what brings you here at this hour, and without giving me notice,' exclaimed the *modiste*, as she rose to welcome him.

'I have come on a sad errand to you, Luce; though it is better you should hear it from my lips than another's.'

She turned pale as death; and her voice shook a little, as she replied—

'I can guess what you have to say. You have been very good to me, and I must not complain; but I was so happy here. I suppose it was right for me to do so; and yet it is hard to think that, if I had not sought to be acknowledged as his wife, he would never have known of my existence. Now you have come to tell me he claims his rights, and that I must go back to him. Nothing

but unhappiness and disappointment can come of it; I told him so in the Park. He and I can never be the same to each other again,' and Luce sank despondently into a chair.

'You misunderstand me,' said Wyndham, gently. 'It is true I have come to conduct you to Ernest de Vitre's house, but the Mighty Ruler of all things has decreed your separation.'

'What?' she cried, as her blue eyes opened wide, with apprehension.

'Luce, Ernest de Vitre has sent me here to say that he would fain see you once more before he dies.'

'Dying! Oh, God, forgive me for what I said just now. But, dying—it cannot be, and he so strong. Ill, perhaps very, but not dying,' said Luce, almost in a whisper.

'Yes; he has met with a frightful accident. I fear he will never see another sunrise. But this won't do. I want you to come quick, you understand.'

'It is very dreadful. I don't love him now, you know, but he was all the world to me once,' replied Luce, with a shiver. 'We women can never quite forget that. I wish I had not said what I did just now,' and she buried her face in her hands.

There was silence between them for a few minutes, and then Wyndham spoke.

'You would wish to please him now, Luce. Time flies, and his dearest wish seems to be to see you again. He sent for me at daybreak this morning. I got out of bed to go to him; and to bring you to his bedside was what he wanted me for. He was ignorant that I knew aught about you; but the memory of those old Lasterton days seems to be nearest his heart just now. As you know, there has been no intimacy between us since my return from the East. Go and get your bonnet, Luce. Painful for you it may be, but you must come.'

'Of course—I know. I won't be five minutes. Whether his wife or no, makes no

difference in my mind. I shall be back directly.'

In less than ten minutes Wyndham and Luce were whirling along towards Mayfair. On arrival there, Gwynne dismissed the cab, and led his companion into the house.

'Wait there,' he said, as he handed her into the drawing-room; 'while I go upstairs, and tell him you are here.'

Left to herself, Luce tried to reduce the thoughts that were rushing through her brain into some order. The lesson of self-control had been graved in her mind by much sorrow and anguish. One thing was clear to her; if he wished it, her post was by his bedside, whether she sat there as wife or mistress. He had wronged her cruelly, it was true; but he was dying, and if her hand could smooth his pillow it was her bounden duty to do so; and with that she took off her bonnet.

The door opened, and Wyndham once more stood before her. 'Come,' he said,

simply, and led the way. He paused for a moment at the chamber-door above. 'He is going fast, and wishes to see you alone. Ring, if you want anything.'

Luce entered; and, as she did so, Fletcher glided noiselessly from the apartment.

'You have come at last,' said De Vitre, as his dark eyes sparkled with feverish light. 'Sit down, my little wife; I have much to say to you.'

'I am here, Ernest;' she replied, in low, tremulous tones, 'and shall remain your nurse as long as you will let me.'

'I sha'n't trouble you long, child. I am dying, whatever they may have thought it right to tell you. I have wronged many women and many men in my day; but the wrong I did you, Luce, is the one that weighs heaviest on me now.'

'Oh, don't think of it now, Ernest. I forgive you with my whole heart.'

'They always do,' muttered the dying cynic. 'I wonder if it is possible to wrong

a woman past forgiveness? and yet they *can* hate. Luce, dear,' he continued, 'if it is the slightest atonement in your eyes for all the misery I have wrought you, I tell you now, in the whole course of my good-for-nothing existence you are the only woman I ever really loved. That I never meant to marry you, I admit; but I think it very probable that you are my lawful wife this minute. I would it should prove so.'

'Oh, never mind all that,' said Luce, softly. 'This is no time to speak of such things; and I'm sure too much talking must be bad for you.'

'I must speak now or never,' he retorted; and, as he did so, his features writhed again with pain. 'Ah,' he muttered between his teeth, 'it is hard to bear. Give me some of that, girl—no, the other bottle, the laudanum—fifteen drops. I'm a fool not to say fifty, and have done with it. That's it, Luce; don't be frightened, I shall be better directly.'

He fell back upon the pillow, and closed his eyes. Gradually the drawn features relaxed, though his hand still played fretfully with the coverlet. Silently Luce stole her own into it, and was rewarded by seeing a smile of recognition steal over his face, as his hand closed on hers; and thus flickered away another hour of that lamp of life that was now burning so low. Once Wyndham peeped into the room; but, at a nod from Luce, noiselessly retired again.

At length De Vitre once more roused himself. 'It is over for the present,' he said, faintly. 'You won't leave me?' and his hand clutched her wrist fiercely, while the dark eyes gazed wistfully at her face.

'My place shall be here,' she replied, in a low voice, 'until you shall say there is no need of me, or it shall please God to take you.'

'Send for Gwynne. I want to see him, if he is yet here.'

Luce did as she was told, and Wynd-

ham was speedily at the dying man's bedside.

'Has Fielding come?' he asked, eagerly.

'Yes; he has just arrived. Will you see him?'

De Vitre made a gesture of assent; and in a few seconds Wyndham glided back into the room, accompanied by the lawyer.

'Listen, both of you,' he said. 'Fielding, you know something of the state of affairs—enough to comprehend the meaning of what I am about to do. I acknowledge this lady my lawful wife, before you two, although our marriage may have been somewhat informal. I do this knowing myself to be dying, and in thorough possession of all my faculties. Had there been time, I should have wished, to prevent any misconception on this point, that the ceremony might have been performed again. Now, Luce, leave me alone with Fielding for ten minutes or so, and then you must come back to me once more.'

Silently Wyndham led her from the room, and De Vitre was left alone with the lawyer. He was evidently sinking fast, but bent, with all the fierce determination of his character, upon the carrying out of his last wishes.

'Give me some brandy first, Fielding—I want something to pull me together—and then take pen and ink, and, in as brief legal phraseology as may be, write down what will serve me as a will. Let it be short, mind; for my strength ebbs fast, and if you're not quick, I may never sign it. The lawyer handed him the stimulant, and then rapidly noted down his instructions.

Luce and Wyndham meanwhile sat silent in the drawing-room below, in which the pendule marked off the fast falling sands of the life above with painful intensity. There is something inexpressibly sad in listening to the clear jarring tick of a clock under these circumstances. Every vibration seems to check off the respirations that so soon shall cease. Each quarter of an hour is looked

upon with awe when we know that a life, the thread of which is woven in our own, is to be numbered now by minutes. When the dark wings of death cast their shadow on the house, and we are told that the hour-glass has been turned for the last time—that already the failing sight looks dimly across the abyss in search of that shadowy shore about which we still doubt, as men have ever done since the world began—as, alas! many yet shall do till all is oblivion.

A quarter of an hour, and Mr. Fielding hurriedly entered the room.

'Go up at once,' he said, 'while I try to write out this as fairly as I can. Poor fellow! the end is very near, and I must carry out his instructions, if possible. One moment, Major Gwynne. He must sign what I am about to write, if his hand can grasp a pen. It's a question, I fear, almost of minutes. Come to me here, if you think it necessary, although I shall not be long.'

Once more Luce seated herself by the

bedside, and clasped the hand of her betrayer. Even in the short time they had been away from him, the change in his features struck both her and Wyndham. The face showed a tinge of ashen grey—the film of approaching dissolution clouded the brilliant dark eyes—his voice had sunk to a whisper. The tears trickled fast down Luce's cheeks as, with a slight pressure of her hand, he murmured, 'It won't be for long now, child. I've tried to atone for the wrong I did you.' The words came slowly and with effort from the pale lips.

Gently she passed her hand over his brow, and pushed back the dark clustering locks; and, as she did so, the hot tears welled up in her eyes, and fell on the grey face beneath her.

'Crying, Luce?' he gasped. 'We're none of us worth it. Fielding!—ah, quick!—'

Wyndham dashed out of the room, and in two minutes was back with the lawyer.

'It's barely finished,' muttered the latter, 'but we must make the best we can of it.'

'Sign your name here, Mr. De Vitre, if you please,' he said, placing the pen in his client's fingers.

'Where?' he gasped. 'I can't see—guide my hand!' But ere the lawyer could interfere, the pen fell from the stiffening fingers. 'Kiss me, Luce,' he moaned; and, as she bent her lips to his brow, De Vitre's restless spirit passed away.

Honest and true were the tears Luce shed for him. Though her love had died out, yet he had once been everything to her, and she was immeasurably shocked by his miserable end. And then he had striven so hard to repair the wrong he had done her. Little she recked that the want of those few scratches of the pen might make a vast difference to her future position. Luce's wants were simple, and her business amply supplied them. Few women would have thought

so little about what that signature might have been to them as did Luce. Careless of custom, she told Wyndham she should like to be present at the funeral, and then drove sadly back to Islington.

'A scratch of a pen makes a difference, Major Gwynne. I did my best; but had this bit of paper been signed, the lady who has just left would have inherited the bulk of the deceased's property. There was also a thousand pounds left to you, amongst other legacies. Of course, as it is, this is merely waste paper. I shall keep it simply to place in the hands of the heir-at-law, as evidence of what the testator's wishes were, so that he may carry them out, if he so pleases. By the way, if that lady can establish her marriage—which you and I stand witnesses to De Vitre's solemnly acknowledging on his deathbed—I presume she is the inheritor.'

'I may as well tell you at once,' replied Wyndham, 'that I have been mixed up in that affair from the commencement, and

believe the marriage to be perfectly legal, although certainly not intended to be so.'

'Ah, Rixon and Cudforth told me they had a strong case. I hope it may prove so, that being De Vitre's last wish.' And then the lawyer took his departure; and Wyndham Gwynne found, strange to say, that the arrangements for his quondam friend's funeral devolved principally upon himself.

CHAPTER XVI.

'RECONCILIATION.'

THE death of De Vitre made a great sensation in the London world. He was a man of mark therein, and a violent death always attracts more notice and sympathy than the severance of life's thread in more ordinary manner. Upon Cecile it fell like a thunderbolt. To say that she was shocked, would by no means convey an idea of her feelings. She was veritably stricken to the ground. A few days ago this man had been a most favoured admirer—a man to whom she stood committed in a way she now shuddered to think upon. It was but the day before the fatal accident that, thanks to her cousin's assistance, she had discharged her debt, and so, to a certain extent, emancipated herself

from the thrall of him whose voice she should never again hear.

It is true that Cecile had never cherished a passion for this dead man. So far she was guiltless. But she had allowed him to express open admiration; she had even encouraged him in so doing. She had defied the world when she knew slanderous tongues were beginning to couple her name with his, instead of shrinking in shame from the idea that Cecile Mallandaine should ever be spoken lightly of. She had quarrelled with her dearest friend for venturing to expostulate with her on her folly; and she had waged almost open war with her husband on the same grounds. Had she loved this man with the wildest and guiltiest of passions, she could hardly have done more to have compromised herself than she had been led to do by a succession of events.

To begin with, she fancied she owed him a vast debt of gratitude for saving Bertie's life. Then came the recklessness which

became her principal characteristic, when, to drown the bitter remembrance of her boy's death, she threw herself into the arms of Mrs. St. Leger and her set. That also was a powerful influence for ill. Then there were the evil and insidious counsels of Pauline, the fatal losses at Ascot—a true, honest nature, discontented at bottom with the life it was leading; all these combined to harden Cecile in her reckless career. De Vitre's persistent and insidious devotion, although, of course, a necessary adjunct, had had really little to do with the position she had held towards him on the night of Lady Trillamere's *fête*.

Wyndham Gwynne had at last opened her eyes to the abyss on the brink of which she had stood. With a shudder, she at last perceived that, but for Wyndham's interference, the coils might shortly have gathered so closely around her that nothing but passive submission to her destiny had been left her. Innocent though she might be in reality, the sentence of her condemnation would have

gone forth: social ostracism might have been pronounced against her. Playing with the passions is no bit safer in private life than in political agitation. The reins get jerked from the feeble fingers that undertake to guide in both cases.

Sadly and sorrowfully did Cecile meditate upon the last eighteen months of her life. The scales had fallen from her eyes now, and bitterly did she regret that reckless, fevered career. Freed from the influence of Pauline St. Leger, she began to be once more alive to the fact that a wife had duties she owed to her husband. 'Ah,' she wailed, 'if my darling had lived, such sin and misery could never have befallen me. The sight of him would have kept me good. Now Hervey can never forgive me; I don't deserve that he should.' The morbid feeling that had possessed her regarding poor Bertie's death had in great measure yielded to Time, the great alleviative of all human affliction. She blamed herself still, but not in the wild,

hysterical manner that she had done in the first year of her bereavement. Could she and her husband ever be to each other again that which they once had been? Then, again, rose Wyndham's grim sentence, 'I will clear away your difficulties now, Cecile, but you must make a full confession of them to your husband ere things can be right between you.' Not his exact words, perhaps, but still that was the gist of them that presented itself to her mind, 'I shall never have courage,' she thought; 'and if he spurns me, as he has good right, what can I do then?'

Sir Hervey meanwhile has also been considerably shocked at the death of De Vitre. He has marvelled much also with the clubs at the flying rumour that Ernest has left a wife behind him—a wife unacknowledged it is true in his lifetime, but nevertheless genuinely bound to him in wedlock, and recognised as such on his deathbed.

'Nothing of the sort, Sir Hervey,' observed a quidnunc who prided himself on the ac-

curacy of his information. 'She was a former mistress. De Vitre sought to legalise their connection when *in extremis*, but died before the ceremony could be completed. Know it for a fact—had it from my lawyer this morning.' But Sir Hervey, looking back upon that interview he had witnessed at the Marble Arch, felt that he knew better the rights of the story.

The Baronet walked home with very mixed feelings that morning. He had of late been fiercely jealous of this man so suddenly called to his account; but death is a great softener of asperities, and vile or relentless is the hand that would throw a stone in the direction of the yet gaping grave. Sir Hervey was far too true and honest a gentleman to do that. Moreover, he also acknowledged a debt of gratitude to the dead man, although not in the enthusiastic and somewhat hysterical fashion of his wife. Men naturally measure such deeds more accurately than women, and of course Sir Hervey knew that his boy's

rescue had been no marvellous piece of heroism.

Arrived at his own house, the Baronet reflected that he had had about enough of town. Parliament was close upon prorogation; he was not involved in committees, or aught else that was cause of detention, and the sooner they went down to Childerley the better. It was not often Cecile and he met now, except at dinner; but he would settle this with her at once, and he made his way to her boudoir.

Yes, Cecile was there, immersed in such gloomy reflections as before narrated, alone with her sadness and her penitence.

She gave a little nervous start as her husband entered; but all she said was the one word, 'Hervey!'

'I hope I don't disturb you,' observed the Baronet quietly; 'but I think it would be as well we should leave London, and go down to Childerley next week, if you can manage to make it suit your engagements?'

'I will do whatever you wish,' replied Cecile, meekly. 'The sooner the better, as far as I am concerned.'

Sir Hervey was surprised at this unwonted docility on his wife's part. The rancorous thought flashed across his mind that her lover's death might have made town distasteful to her. It was almost icily that he said—

'Very good, then, I will make arrangements for Tuesday next.'

Cecile merely bowed her head in response. What did she care about how or when they left London? Her whole mind was flooded with the thought that the hour had arrived to throw herself upon her husband's compassion, and make a full confession of her wrong doing.

'We'll consider that settled, then,' he said, and made his way leisurely to the door. His hand was on the lock, when, with a convulsive gasp and in a tremulous voice, Cecile exclaimed, 'Hervey!'

'What is it?' he asked, quietly; though there was something in the tone that strongly arrested his attention.

'Come back and listen to me,' she cried, bursting into tears. 'I can't help what you may think of me or do with me, Hervey; but I must tell you all. Weak, wicked I have been, but not criminal. You loved me once. For the memory of that old love, hear me now. I can bear it no longer. I must be to you once more a wife or a stranger; it is for you to decide,' and then, with streaming eyes and faltering tongue, Cecile told, in passionate tones, the story of her wrong doing.

She was kneeling at her husband's knee as she finished, and he had interrupted the tear-stained history with never a word. Anxiously she raised her eyes to read her sentence. What she saw seemed to give her fresh courage.

'I can look you in the face, Hervey, and say, honestly, that I had no guilty love for

poor Ernest de Vitre. He flattered my vanity. I owed him so much money, and my boy's death made me reckless. I was afraid of you. I ought to be more so now, but I am not. You won't desert me, Hervey, will you?' and the blue eyes, swimming in tears, gazed anxiously into the stern face that looked down upon them.

'No,' he said, at last, drawing her to him. 'You are very young, and have been very foolish, Cecile; but, if you can honestly say you will trust in your husband alone in future, I, my little wife, can forget all the misery you have caused me.'

Cecile's reply was to nestle into her husband's arms, with a sensation of overwhelming relief, and whisper, 'You shall never have to forgive me again.'

There was much putting together of wigs, and scrutinising of the register concerning Luce de Vitre's marriage; but, at last, the best legal authorities gave it as their opinion, 'that the building in which the ceremony

was performed had been duly licensed that year for marriages; that the deceased Arthur Matthews, who had performed the ceremony, was a *bonâ fide* minister of the Baptist persuasion; and that, therefore, Luce Schwerin had been lawfully joined in wedlock to Ernest de Vitre; and as he, Ernest de Vitre, had died intestate, that she, Luce de Vitre, was heir to all his property and personalties.'

Clad in the deepest of mourning, Luce had stood by the grave of her lover, and, with downcast eyes, had listened to the solemn and touching burial service of the Protestant Church. Her own hands placed reverently on the coffin two wreaths woven of the choicest flowers; and, sadly, then she let Wyndham put her into a carriage, and drove back to Islington.

Some three weeks afterwards Gwynne called upon her, and brought the intelligence that she had been legally pronounced Mrs. De Vitre and the inheritor of some four

thousand a year. Luce seemed hardly gratified at first.

'I suppose,' she said, 'I must give up all my business here, and learn to be a fine lady. You have meant it for the best, and I am glad the lawyers say my marriage was a true one; but, my guardian, I shall never be so happy again as I have been in Islington.'

'Pooh, Luce, don't talk nonsense; you will see.'

So the business was disposed of, and the prettiest and cleverest *modiste* in Islington vanished from the scene, and established herself in a sunny little villa at Richmond. She was very bored, and missed the old busy life dreadfully at first; but, in course of time, as Wyndham had mysteriously put it, 'she did see.'

To say more about Lia Remington, further than stating the fact that Alec Merriott, after a tedious illness, finally recovered, would be almost an insult to the imagination of my

readers. But wondrous are the revolutions which Cupid occasions in our sentiments and ideas. Can you fancy bonny, bright-eyed Lia, with her hands clasped round her lover's arm, recanting her theories of the intellectual work due from man in this world? and saying—

'There's one thing you must do for me, Alec, dearest, when you are quite well and strong again. You'll promise, won't you?'

'What is it?' he replied, looking fondly down into the dark eyes.

'Let me see you win a steeple chase!'

Now what are historians to do when women so thoroughly abjure their previous characteristics in this preposterous fashion? I can but chronicle events as they happen. I pride myself on my veracity, and can merely plead that the inconsistencies of mankind are facts patent to countless generations. I honestly don't know what Merriott's reply was, but should be little surprised if he declared that his steeple chase days were over.

Never be so rash as to presume that the ideas of men or women may not be totally transmogrified if some little time has elapsed since you last saw them. Your high churchman may have turned evangelical in five years; your reckless plunger think racing wicked; your woman of fashion become a sister of mercy!

That unsigned will of De Vitre's had bequeathed a legacy to Pauline St. Leger, and every wish expressed on that sheet of paper had been carefully carried out by Luce. The windfall was grateful; but it would have taken a good deal more than that to place the Oxley St. Legers and their creditors on comfortable terms. They therefore prudently remain abroad, and Pauline is well known at Monaco, and other Continental haunts of that description. Rumour says that her bright eyes and her husband's *écarté* have been found destructive to more than one young man bent on seeing the world. An attack of 'the St. Leger fever' is almost a bye-word

in the clubs now-a-day, so many impoverished systems having come under their notice occasioned by that complaint.

Sad to relate, our communist friends met with little sympathy from a jury of their countrymen. 'The Simple 'un' levanted quietly, and escaped the clutches of the police. 'The Wheedler' also, without embarrassing himself on the subject of his comrades, reached the tax-cart, made his way to London, and vanished into the mist of crime that hangs like a miasm over the huge city. But Casey was not so fortunate; he was picked up by the rural police, and appeared at the bar with his friend and leader. In spite of an animated speech from the Count based on M. Proudhon's text that 'Property is theft,' they were found guilty by a matter-of-fact jury, and sentenced to twenty years' penal servitude for burglary with violence by an equally matter-of-fact Judge.

Mdlle. Suzanne, feeling herself somewhat compromised by events, gave her mistress a

somewhat abrupt warning, and departed to exercise her *droit naturel* in some other household.

* * * * *

'So Wyndham Gwynne is to marry that mysterious Mrs. De Vitre, who was so long in abeyance,' remarked Durant from the depths of an arm-chair in the Anti-Lysistrata smoking-room.

'Yes,' retorted Egerton Slane; 'it's a matter of congratulation to get anyone married in these times properly.'

'How so?'

'Because it is a curious thing in these days that the old straightforward, simple belief of the sexes in each other has quite disappeared from the fashionable world. The men and the women confront each other now like hostile armies. Sentiment is deemed weakness. All chivalrous feeling with regard to women is becoming rapidly a thing to laugh at. All feminine softness is fast disappearing on her side. Woman is struggling to place

herself on an equality with man. Man is beginning to recognise her as an intruder on his sphere of life. Marriage will consequently soon become a simple question of partnership—an alliance contracted because it promotes the worldly interests of the contracting parties.'

'Don't talk bosh, Egerton, and never mind the fashionable world. They don't count for much in the destinies of a nation.'

'They do in this way: their follies, vices, prejudices, and ideas filter down to the classes below them. These are all aped, much as their dress is imitated. You might as well say that the aristocracy had nothing to do with the first French revolution.'

'Of course I don't mean that. But I do mean that Nature will always hold her own, and that there will be marriages for love in plenty, as there always have been, despite the clap-trap about women's rights, &c.'

'My dear Durant, don't run away from the subject. We live in an age of petty legisla-

tion. Our gambling and various other indiscretions have lately claimed the attention of our lawgivers. I can conceive shortly that every man will be held under obligation to boil his kettle by Act of Parliament. Perhaps it is good for us. I sincerely hope it is. But —and I hold this out as a warning to the unmarried amongst you,' continued Slane, addressing the circle generally—'I think it highly probable, with the prevalent mania there is on the subject of education, that it will be shortly decreed that a satisfactory examination must precede proposal; and that a few years later, competitive examinations of the two sexes will decide their matrimonial destiny.'

A shout of laughter greeted Egerton's novel theory.

'You mean,' said Durant, 'that the man at the top of his list is to marry the woman at the top of hers?'

Just the reverse; the man who makes most marks should be married to the woman

who makes least, and so on. By so doing you ensure the continual development of the intellect of the nation. While we are about it, let's be rational. We must not marry a pair of fools, to produce offspring still more foolish to encumber the earth.'

'Recommend you to promulgate those views in print, old man,' laughed Durant.

'Ah, yes; I'm off to write the article now. No use talking to people behind the age, like you. Come along; you'll be ill if you smoke any more, and then tell the wife I was the cause of it.'

'You'd better not propound your theory to her,' said Durant, rising.

'No, I don't mean to, or to anyone else in petticoats. The world takes a deal of mending. The more it's cobbled, the worse it gets. "That which is crooked cannot be made straight, and that which is wanting cannot be numbered."'

THE END.

Spottiswoode & Co., Printers, London and Westminster.

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA
3 0112 042044880